

WAYFARING DANGER

Jill Battson | For The New Mexican



Sofia Henriques

Fishermen on the coast of Senegal, where thousands of migrants make risky ocean voyages every year in search of work

Right, Todd Lester (left) and Stefan Barbic of freeDimensional, an organization building alliances between artists and social-justice activists



In January 2007, the U.S. Coast Guard rescued 14 Senegalese men from a dilapidated catamaran in the wintry sea about 800 miles east of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The men, all between the ages of 23 and 43, were destined for the United States and had spent 47 days at sea with little food and water, equipped only with a global-positioning system.

The men started their journey in the small island of Gorée, one of 19 *communes d'arrondissement* (semiautonomous wards) of the city of Dakar in Senegal — the westernmost point of Africa. Senegalese workers used to travel to the Canary Islands to pick grapes in the Spanish vineyards, but with Spain clamping down on illegal immigrants, human-rights advocates fear that more job-hunting Africans will pay hundreds of dollars to undertake trips of greater magnitude and risk in boats that are barely seaworthy.

To people in dire economic circumstances, even a 50-50 chance of surviving an ocean voyage and finding work seems better than the odds of surviving at home, according to Todd Lester, executive director of freeDimensional, a three-year-old organization that fosters international collaborations between artists and social-justice activists. Desperate people tend to commodify their lives, he said. “They do understand that there’s a 50-50 chance; 50 per cent is that they get to the place and get a better job — that’s the payoff; the other 50 per cent is that they drown at sea.

“The Senegalese have a tradition of their young men traveling, finding work, sending money home, and ultimately coming back — a sort of a rite of passage — so, culturally, they are disposed to such wayfaring,” Lester said. But a further impetus to the outmigration is the loss of traditional jobs, such as fishing. A Fisheries Partnership Agreement between Senegal and the European Union allows foreign fleets to heavily fish Senegal’s coastal waters, thus reducing opportunities for Senegalese fishermen.

The Associated Press has estimated that 30,000 Africans migrated to the Canary Islands in 2006, and it is believed that thousands of people who attempt these hazardous sea journeys perish from dehydration, starvation, or drowning.

To raise awareness of the plight of Senegalese migrants, Lester and freeDimensional’s managing director, Stefan Barbic, speak about the problem at Santa Fe Art Institute on Monday, April 21. The two arrive in Santa Fe fresh from a conference with New York’s Senegalese community, which they hope will produce a unified message about the Senegalese migrants detained last year (10 were deported after petitioning for political asylum, one received political asylum, and “three are still in the warehouse,” according to Lester). FreeDimensional’s participation in that meeting forms the basis of a three-day workshop that Lester and Barbic lead at SFAI, beginning Tuesday, April 22.

The workshop is part of Santa Fe Art Institute’s OUTSIDER: Tourism, Migration, and Exile series. The institute is one of many arts centers around the world that make up the Alliance of Artists Communities. SFAI offers work and living spaces to artists displaced

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by political, social, or natural disasters. The institute hosted artists from New York City after September 11 and from the Gulf Coast region after Hurricane Katrina.

FreeDimensional is known primarily for its Creative Safe Haven and Critical Placement programs, which help human-rights defenders who work as artists or journalists. Sara Heitlinger and Franc Purg, two visual artists involved in Critical Placement, are currently in residence at SFAI.

The second phase of freeDimensional's development is to work with vulnerable people in their own communities, Lester said. "In the beginning it made sense for our whole work to be about creative safety, but then we understood that there are a whole bunch of ways that artistic communities engage in social justice and we'd better listen to what they were already doing so that we didn't become obsolete."

The Santa Fe workshop, Lester said, will focus on the design and production of a pamphlet in French, English, and Wolof, a language spoken in Senegal. The pamphlet will be distributed at Dak'Art: The Biennale of Contemporary African Art in Dakar in May. It will mimic the Spanish government's propaganda aimed at deterring Senegalese migration, but its message is about the dangers involved in ocean crossings and navigating U.S. immigration politics. "By the time we arrive in Santa Fe for the workshop, we'll already have the content, including the translation into French and Wolof," Lester predicted.

Economic migration has been a hot topic at major art events like Documenta and the 2007 Venice Biennale, he said, but "we felt it incumbent, organizationally, to make an action during an art-world event, such as Dak'Art, that is also proximal to the boat launches."

Lester hopes freeDimensional's intervention will raise awareness in Senegal, in the art world, and in the mainstream press "so that there is pressure on policy-makers to address this number of people disappearing at sea. We think that that's the only way that policy changes. Once we get to Senegal, we'll be hitting the marketplace and public spaces at a time when we know we'll have international press during the first week of the biennale." ◀

details

- ▼ Lecture by Todd Lester and Stefan Barbic of freeDimensional; part of Santa Fe Art Institute's OUTSIDER: Tourism, Migration, and Exile program
6 p.m. Monday, April 21
Tipton Hall, College of Santa Fe,
1600 St. Michael's Drive
\$5, \$2.50 students & seniors
- ▼ Workshop with Todd Lester and Stefan Barbic
10 a.m. - 4 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, April 22-24
Santa Fe Art Institute, 1600 St. Michael's Drive
\$100 per day, scholarships available
- ▼ Information for both events: 424-5050

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