

Sounds From the Street Episode 2: Bardia Saeedi on the Homeless Art Bus

[Music]

Bardia Saeedi (Guest): And now I consider myself an activist. I'm working with the men and women who have housing issues; It's just an amazing experience.

[Music]

Saeedi: I'm actually going through some personal transformations working on this; so, my heart is in it, my mind is in it, everything, all of my energy is in this right now

[Music]

Adam Kampe (Host): This is sounds from the street, where we get to meet the men and women who define Street Sense, DC's non-profit media center dedicated to creating economic opportunities for people experiencing homelessness. I'm your host, Adam Kampe, and today's guest is artist Bardia Saeedi. Originally from Iran and formerly an IT exec., Saeedi now identifies as an artist activist. He runs the interactive art workshop for Street Sense. Today he'll share his take on the transformative powers of interactive art and why his workshop participants are overhauling a school bus to become a mobile art gallery and advocacy platform.

Saeedi: I have never been an activist, you know, I care about a lot of different issues but there were too many issues and never kinda found one that was, ya know, I was like really- this is it and blah blah. And so I came at it from an art angle, using interactive art for social issues and I was working on a project about food and food security and a concept developed and one night or one morning whatever I remember I said wow! This concept fits really well the homeless issue. So I thought about it some more and I did a just a quick, very very quick search and the first organization I called was Street Sense. The first one. And I didn't know they had different media outlets, or workshops as they call them. And yeah I met with Bryan and the original idea was too wacky, it's changed now and it's evolved and it was kind of part of the whole process. It starts with one idea, and I like the projects to be participatory, and so its completely open to modification, to change of direction, to however it goes and we just facilitate and a little bit of facilitation doesn't go too far off. So yeah, Street Sense came as pure luck, it was just, wow, it happened and it's a perfect perfect match after I found out what they actually do and what they're trying to do, which is expand out of just the paper and into these other media channels. And I've met all you wonderful folks. It was fantastic.

Kempe: yeah and I love how diverse the group of people- the mix is really interesting

Saeedi: so I have to say that, when I said I've never been an activist and i've only been involved in street sense for a few months, and now I consider myself an activist. I'm working with the men and women who have housing issues. It's just an amazing experience and all of them have stories to tell and want to tell their stories, I'm finding out that they really want a listening ear

Ron Verquer: that's what. My name is Ron Verker you know, it's a roof over my and food on the table, lights come on, give me a pizza you know [laughs] and nuke it or it's too soft or put it in the oven where it's got some crust to it. Whatever turns your crank. It's just the simple things. That's it; be grateful for what you have because, yeah, it can go away and then people get all upset

Kempe: So there's one thing you should know about Ron, he loves racecars and is an experienced mechanic in fact, he inspected the bus to help ensure it was street legal.

Where do you see yourself in five years Ron

Verquer: [blows air] I know where I'd like to be

Kempe: running a shop?

Verquer: that or driving, finally being in a car racing against these people to see how good am I against them. how good am I?

Saeedi: Well this whole thing about art as a mean of a self expression that is a great, great vehicle for them to you know voice their story, voice their feelings

Kempe: that's actually question number eleven

Saeedi: [laughs]

okay so, your particular workshop, speaking of workshops and the expanding street sense media center, is pretty unique. Can you just describe what it is you're setting out to do and are doing and also just give a brief definition of interactive art.

Most art is something that you kind of step aside and watch and appreciate and contemplate. Interactive art, by definition, is a kind of art that encourages you to engage and come closer and play and touch. That's been around for a long time it's not a new concept; although, using high tech and computer controlled stuff, part of it is new, like projection based interactive art, LED based interactive art, those are new but just standing in front of one of those, what do you call them, concave mirrors

A funhouse mirror

yeah, that's interactive, ya know, you go in there and you kind of play, you play and you create something. And it's- usually it's an installation art so it occupies a physical space, the more successful ones occupy a larger space, although that's not a rule, It means that the experience is immersive. Just like when you walk into a movie theater, even the field of vision is covered by the large screen and the effect obviously is much much more, and so most interactive art, again not all this is a thing, is an immersive experience you walk through it, it covers your field of vision. So yeah, that's interactive art.

And tell us about your interactive art project with *Street Sense*. Based around the magic bus. Magic bus yeah. It has evolved, it was one thing, changed into another thing, and now it's a bus. First of all we wanted an immersive experience. Busses are perfect immersive experiences. When you walk in, you're inside the thing. You now all walls, front, back, and on the sides you can have things going on. We haven't designed it, intentionally, we haven't designed what happens because this is a participatory thing. My role here is not necessarily an artist although I want to do some art of my own. But my role is a facilitator to introduce our colleagues to different tools and different ways of expressing themselves. Then sit back and watch what they do and what they come up with.

AK: And here's one piece of street theatre they dreamed up and presented live last week at *Dunbar High School* under the hot hot sun. Ok. Ready? Imagine you're standing in front of a classic yellow school bus. The bus is wrapped in large sheets of brown paper. It's like a giant rectangular box. Under the paper

stands three homeless individuals. All you can see are their feet. Suddenly after reciting lines from an appointed poem, "Can you see me?" "Can you hear me?" They tear through the paper like a football team at homecoming. Reggie Black was one of the participants.

Reggie Black: To basically highlight the metaphor of people that experience housing instability, They are invisible. Even in large accents. This is what we felt like, we were invisible when we did a different piece. So we said, "Let's do something different. We have a few media people coming out, use this to raise money for our project and everything here with the interactive art. And I said, "Okay, let's think about something interactive. At first I was saying, "Let's take the bus and make it invisible as the art piece," It came out as a better idea to flip that. Go from invisibility to visibility. "I'm gonna make you see me."

BS: While we were waiting for the bus to happen and the fundraising and all of that, we'll do a project. Then somebody asks, "What is the message that we are giving?" "I don't know what the message is." They are the ones who know what the big message is. So Caulton said, "Hey, we could talk about people being one or two paychecks away from being homeless, and we talked about that a little bit. He was talking about that he wants them to kind of camouflage, blend in into the background. Homeless folks are also called, "Invisibles," people don't see them and don't look at them. I have no idea how many Millany came up with all of this. She started saying that I have these black masks, I have one black mask. She said, "I wanna lie on the ground." So she lied on the ground, I had a piece of fabric and put that on top of her. That was a very very strong image. Again, I have no idea where that came from. She said, "I want people to step on top of me, That people will walk on me." I go, "Woah!" The only thing I added was to bring it back to this age I said, "Okay, when we ask people to come, we ask them to take a selfie." "So that's what we did." We took it in front of the Wilson building. The one interesting thing that happened was the people who did not, they asked why and they said, "Oh no I can't do this." Those people who were much more affected emotionally, than the ones who actually came and stepped on the picture. This is the other thing that I noticed, I'm sure others have noticed this, other workshop leaders that folks that are on the street, their normal interactions with the public is one thing.

Our Vendors sell the paper. When you do some street art, your role in the street changes. Now you're in command. Now you own that space, and I noticed that. These guys are changing, the bull horn, like yelling through the bullhorn. Participants were saying all kinds of things, funny things. You know they were going all out. So that was really interesting to me.

AK: Because in that moment

BS: You're an artist.

AK: They have no idea what your background is.

BS: You have to tell them, "These are not actors." We actually had to tell people that these are not actors. Which was kind of a shame. If they thought they were actors, that definitely takes away from the experience. It's funny, one thing I have to mention is one of the reasons I wanted to do this was to bring some inspiration into the group, not knowing. Everyday I interact I'm the one inspired, I'm not exaggerating. So they are the source of inspiration.

So going back to the bus now, inside is hopefully going to be an immersive experience, and when you walk from the one end to the other, you come out and go, "Wow, what was that." The outside is something else. It's gonna change, right now we're thinking of painting the bus basically graffiti art. And

the top is what everybody is excited about, is going to be a stage. That is an incredible platform, just imagine a bus driving around D.C, different performances, different poetry readings, and just advocacy stuff. Speeches. You want to invite a group of people for a night out in town and educate them about something. You have the bus.

AK: I was thinking, you could even put a projector on the top and project movies.

BS: Yeah, I mean everyday somebody comes up with a new way of using the bus. It's basically become a communication platform. I'm not an expert in the topic as I've said before. I know there are different organizations that are doing different things for the housing issue, and people who are experiencing the housing, unstable housing. I think *Street Sense* is coming at it from an angle of empowerment. So you're empowering people to do things that they would not normally do. I was hanging out with Levester, we went to *Home Depot* to buy supplies for tomorrow's video shoot. At the end I'm with a couple of homeless folks at *Home Depot*. They said, "Let's buy a welcome mat." Another homeless person approached us and Levester immediately told him, "*Street Sense*, you need to know about *Street Sense*." He was educating the guy about where it is and how to go about becoming a vendor. That to me was a perfect example of why *Street Sense* is so good. It gives people another try to interact with society, definitely a source of income, a good source of income for some, if you are an entrepreneur which a lot of people are forced to become an entrepreneur. If you are, and if you are a salesperson, you can definitely make money. Good money too. It empowers, lets them engage with society in a different way. All around it is really good. Now that *Street Sense* is expanding to other channels it's so much better.

AK: So this is something I've been asking everybody. What is your dream scenario? What is your goal?

BS: I am glad you asked. [Laughs] So I dream big. My thing is that we're building an empire to inspire, that's not just words. My ultimate dream is to build an empire where it's from the bottom up, and everyone's a king in this empire. The commodity that is exchanged, is inspiration. We can do that through art, through conversation, through community. Art is a great tool for that. People come to us left and right to do an art bus. The whole commotion of the bus is so strong. All kinds of different business, commerce models that we could get into. So yeah, who knows, maybe this empire will develop and inspire others to replicate and be a sustainable solution.

They only way that we will find this solution is through the people that are going through these situations. They are the ones that will come up and say, "Why don't we do this?" Any solution that's kind of injected from outside, chances are there is a small chance that it will be a sustainable solution. That's why *Street Sense* is so important, because we are actually working with people who are going through these issues on a day to day basis.

AK: That was artist Barida Saeedi talking *Street Sense* media, interactive art, and the now famous "Art Bus." Speaking of which, he's launched crowdfunding campaign with *Start Some Good*. So Barida, would you tell the people how they can make this bus "roar" to life?

BS: Yeah, Yeah so the project is called *I Have a Home Here* and the website is IHaveaHomeHere.com. Facebook page: [I Have a Home Here](https://www.facebook.com/IHaveaHomeHere)

AK: You heard the man, and of today there are only six days left folks, clock is ticking. Get online and donate.

[Music]

AK: I must note that the bus is a rolling media magnet. If you want to learn or see more about it, Google WAMU's Metro Connection Piece on the Homeless Art Bus. There's also a real nice story in *The Washington Post's Local* section. To hear more *Sounds From the Street*, check out StreetSense.Org/Audio. Please keep the conversation going on Facebook and Twitter @StreetSenseDC