

Event report
PoC Week Through the Arts: Artists from Conflict on Protection, Pressure and Survival
20 May 2026

The event was convened by Nonviolent Peaceforce. Co-sponsors include the Permanent Representation of France to the UN, the Permanent Observer mission of the African Union to the UN, Artists for Freedom Initiative, Cross borders Music, The Gaza Poets Society, MyPetiteGallery, New York African Film Festival, and University for Peace.

In a week defined by high-level statements and carefully hedged statements, the event tried to offer a different register (poetry, music, and visual art) created by people living in or displaced by conflict, presented in an intimate walking exhibition format.

The premise drew on the UNESCO Constitution's recognition that peace must be constructed in the minds of people, and on the 1999 Declaration on a Culture of Peace, which recognised artists and creative practitioners as essential actors in building non-violent societies. The evening's logic itself was that protection fails when it loses sight of the people it is meant to protect and that art is a means to keep them in view.

The event was also, by design, a small test. In a year of shrinking budgets, tightening visa restrictions, and contracting political will, it was a test to see whether there is still room, in the UN system and particularly in events like PoC Week, to include the voices the system exists to protect, against all odds.

The artists and their work:

The evening brought together artists whose work emerged directly from experiences of conflict, displacement, and survival. They performed and presented live and entered into direct conversation with those in the room.

Ahmed Sarsour, joining remotely from Gaza, opened with *Don't Leave Us Behind?!*, a poem that follows a narrator (himself) who erases himself only to find he cannot escape the world he left behind. The poem traces a journey through checkpoints, rubble, borders that turn people away, and a mother sitting beside an empty bed. It ends with a direct address to the audience: are you going to take a stand? The poem places a single consciousness inside a collective catastrophe, and avoids the distance of statistics in that way.

Peter Kidi's poem *Metrics* turned its gaze on the humanitarian system itself. Its subject is a man whose suffering has been translated into indicators (consumption scores, graduation pathways, self-reliance metrics) and who has learned to perform recovery in the language of his evaluators. *He learned to stand straight / even when his bones whispered collapse. He learned to speak in numbers / even when his truth came in tears.* The poem is a precise and devastating account of what happens when systems designed to help people become better at measuring improvement

than at seeing people. Its final image “*a number that learned how not to scream*” named something that much of the week’s discussion circled without quite reaching.

Jahan Rafi contributed visual work exploring the experience of women and the pressure put on their existence, identity and survival in her home country of Afghanistan. Jahan co-founded the Centre for Women Artists in Kabul and has spent her career painting women, their identities, their social roles, and the limitations imposed on them. Her work asks why women are made to feel the weight of gender difference when trying to find their place in society, and what it means to carry that weight across generations. In a room mostly populated by policy professionals, her paintings also asked a crucial question in protection discussions: what does it mean to see a person as more than the context that produced them?

Bart Was Not Here offered similar reflections, drawing from his origin context of Burma. Bart presented a zine developed in conversation with the MIT Global Humanities Project’s *Relocating Agency amid Political Uncertainty and Exile*; a project working with Burmese artists displaced by the 2021 military coup. The zine explored what it means for art to be a tool of self-preservation in the middle of violence, and what happens when that act is then politicised from the outside, when survival becomes symbolism before the person has had a chance to simply survive. The insight it carried for the room was that protecting people’s dignity in conflict means seeing them as more than the politics and the violence that got them there in the first place.

The quartet **Crossing Borders Music** performed two musical pieces: *Lao Rahal Soti* (“If My Voice Departs”), and *Incertitudes!* by Haitian artist Dickens Princivil. The organisation works across community spaces to share the stories and music of people whose voices are suppressed because of identity, trauma, or circumstance with a commitment to free and accessible programming. *Lao Rahal Soti*’s explored the question of what happens to testimony when the person who carries it is no longer present to deliver it? *Incertitudes!* explored the uncertainty that comes from lack of safety.

Finally, we screened a shortfilm by Jamal Ademola titled *Hope*, created in collaboration with poet Salome Agbaroji. The film follows a young poet thrust into an animated realm after doom-scrolling through social media, where she encounters a Black Crowned Crane. It asks the difficult question: how do we keep going when hope feels fragile? Ademola has described the project as a response to the weight of this chaotic, fractured, and heavy moment the world is going through and as a deliberate act of resistance against apathy. What made the film resonate in this particular room was its insistence that hope is not passive. It is chosen, built, and protected. That framing sits in quiet but direct tension with the fatigue that runs beneath much of PoC Week, where the gap between what the system should do and what it does can make optimism feel naive. The film did not resolve that tension but it held it and refused to let the audience settle into either despair or false comfort. It was a necessary reminder that things can, in fact, change.

Key reflection / takeaways:

The event achieved its stated outcomes which was greater visibility for artists from conflict settings within the UN space, a genuine cross-disciplinary conversation between humanitarian actors, diplomats, and artists, and a proof of concept for integrating artistic voices into PoC Week more systematically.

Participants generally described the evening as a breath of fresh air in a week of diplomatic speak, something that reconnected them to their inner world and to why they got involved in this work in the first place. One participant wrote afterwards: *our hearts, not just our minds, need to help guide our decisions and our work*. In a week designed to shape policy, reconnecting people to the human stakes of what they are deciding felt very meaningful.

When we talk about including conflict-affected voices, we tend to default to the idea of bringing people from conflict zones to New York. That remains the ideal, but the current visa environment makes it increasingly impossible and the response to that cannot simply be to give up. Refugee and diaspora networks already present in the US are an underused resource. People who have lived through what this week discusses, who carry that knowledge and those stories, are already here. The artists present were, for the most part, in exile or diaspora able to be in New York precisely because they had left the places their work describes.

We believe that overall, the event showed that there is real space to be creative at PoC Week, both literally and figuratively. The question for next year is not whether it is possible but whether the UN-NY community is willing to treat it as a priority rather than a pleasant addition. That means actively mapping and engaging diaspora and refugee artists based in the US, building those relationships before the week rather than scrambling during it, and making the case inside the broader PoC Week programme that this kind of space is not peripheral to the mission but rather part of it.

Finally, a crucial key takeaway is that the humanitarian and diplomatic community's ability to sustain political will for civilian protection over time, across changing administrations, shifting donor priorities, and compounding crises, depends on its ability to maintain genuine contact with the human reality of what it is working to prevent. Art is one of the most reliable mechanisms for that.