Invisible Borders: How transnational artist residences are adapting to travel bans

How are the arts adapting to the #NewNormal? Well over 11 months into the global pandemic, this series presents experiences and stories of #resilience, #adaptation, and success from the arts sector to the Covid-19 pandemic, with particular focus on arts & disabilities, artists residencies and arts funding.

Art transcends borders. Physical borders, mental boundaries, transnational highways that bind us in place. Travel has been savaged by the 'new normal'. Lockdowns and restrictions designed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have prevented us from crossing into other countries, even from travelling within our own. As we wait in isolation for a solution to be found, art can help us connect.
Invisible Borders, a Trans-African photography organisation based in Lagos, Nigeria, is most well known for its annual road trip. Travelling with troupes of young artists from Africa, Asia and Europe, the organisation curates a **transnational artistic residency**. Inspired by the road, and by what they learn about other cultures along the way, these artists tell the story of the journey through the mediums of photography, literature, and film. The diverse and unique pieces produced during each trip prove a testament to the power of producing art in transnational transit.

Their most recent trip saw Invisible Borders travel to Bangladesh. Taking African and Bangladeshi artists all around the country, in collaboration with Drik Network and Pathshala South Asia Media Institute, Invisible Borders explored the South Asian country for 10 days. Bangladeshi artists shed light on newfound or long cherished features of their own country, juxtaposed by art made by African artists inspired by a wildly new landscape and culture. Making many stops along the India-Bangladesh frontier, the group explored creative production on the brink of physical borders. The trip culminated in an exhibition at the Dhaka Art Summit, just before the COVID-19 era arrived in full force.

Past trips have taken Invisible Borders from Lagos, Nigeria to Maputo, Mozambique, Bamako, Mali, and as far as Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

But, in the era of COVID-19 border restrictions, these transnational artist residences have had to find a new direction, a 'new normal'. They have had to develop new projects to keep alive the **spirit of transcontinental creative collaboration**.

Crucial to this endeavour is the fact that Invisible Borders does not solely focus on tangible, material borders. Transnational networks of artists and thinkers transcend national or continental borders. Invisible Borders can draw inspiration from their wide-reaching network for creatives, hailing from 14 countries in Africa, Asia and Europe, as far apart as Gabon and Germany, Belgium and Bangladesh, Spain and Sudan.
As the organisation’s founder and creative director Emeka Okereke puts it: “We build artistic highways.”

These transnational networks of collaborating creatives exist along metaphysical highways. They do not need to still be travelling together to be inspired by one another, to produce art together.

The organisation’s latest project, iVisible, combats ideological boundaries that face countries all over the world. The project challenges creators from all over the world to submit a piece that tackles a stereotype they hold or have held about Africa. Whether an internalised assumption about one’s own country or people, a long-standing notion about a neighbouring nation, or a subconscious presumption about a far away land, we are all guilty of falling for stereotypes. They can be difficult to shake, sometimes seeming integral to our understanding of a people or a place.

Many of these find their foundations in exoticisations and alterisms born of the colonial era. All over the world, nations have sought to shake these historical misnomers, tropes devised to denigrate or dehumanise. Many more seem harmless, but, in reality, they impede our observations of cultural nuance. These are troubles shared by peoples from every continent on earth, and these artistic networks allow creatives to tackle them together. In confronting these stereotypes in one cohesive, transnational project, Invisible Borders hopes to broaden their audience’s perspective of Africa, from inside the continent and from abroad.

While many artists seek prestige from Western Europe and North America, Invisible Borders is focusing on a different trajectory. Making African art accessible to an African audience, and to audiences across the postcolonial world, is at the forefront of their plans. In pursuing trips that inspire art at the intersection of African, Asian, and Eastern European cultural production, they hope to move away from the international race and class hierarchies entrenched in the contemporary art world. They have featured frequently in European art exhibitions in the past, however, being included in prestigious showcases in Venice, Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris, Bern, Cologne, and Krakow.

In establishing a network of artists around the globe, cross-cultural collaboration can continue. Even while we cannot all physically sit together, or travel together, we can still work together. Transnational artists residencies can exist in the ‘new normal’ while these connections still exist and continue to inspire.

And, for the travellers, there is still hope on the horizon. Invisible Borders are making tentative plans for a new transnational residency in 2021, wherein they will take artists up Africa’s East Coast. Hoping to collaborate with artists in the Middle East, the route will explore the cross-cultural artistic influence that has existed between East Africa and the Arabian Gulf for millennia. Posting about the trip in English, French, Swahili, and Arabic, they hope to explore the shared linguistic etymologies that exists between the continents, the heritage that is unmistakable in day to day interaction.
While these cross-border trips may seem like a hazy dream in the 'new normal' age, maintaining a strong network of artists across the world has facilitated hope. While collaboration and artistic production continues to sit at the intersection of diverse countries and cultures, the ambition of transnational artistic projects like Invisible Borders has prevailed.

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