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Temporary relocation, Exile and Artists Impacted by Displacement

By Mary Ann DeVlieg / November 1, 2020 / [Issue 21, Exile, Magazine](#) / 12 minutes of reading

What if, the girl says. Instead of saying, this border divides those places. We said, this border *unites* these places. This border holds together these two really interesting different places. What if we declared border crossings places where, listen, when you crossed them, you yourself became doubly possible.

Smith, A., 2019. *Spring*. 1st ed. London: Hamish Hamilton.

A friend in Asia writes to me; he is concerned for the safety of another friend, a political cartoonist living in an increasingly repressive country where journalists and political cartoonists who criticise the government are more frequently being ‘disappeared’. “Can you help?” my friend asks. “Sure,” I write back, “put us in touch with one another.” And I inwardly sigh, thinking of the rough road ahead for the cartoonist. I think of all the difficult decisions s/he will have to make... at best. At worst, s/he will lose all control of where s/he wants to be, to go, to work, to bring their immediate family, to earn a living, to be part of a community. In most cases, even with their level of professionalism, s/he will go not where s/he wants to go, but where it is possible to go. Hailed as a hero in the West for their brave political observations that ‘speak truth to power’, if lucky, s/he may be invited to spend some weeks or even longer,

in an artists' or writers' residency. Better, if s/he has a PhD or can teach at the university level, s/he may be able to obtain a position teaching or researching at a university, which will give status, a salary and a place to live. But few artists have these qualifications, and often, the waiting lists for any of these options are years long. S/he might also have to stay and live with the danger, especially with Covid-19 and visa restrictions for international travel.

I write to the cartoonist and outline the choices s/he has to make, the conditions they depend on, and the pros and cons of each. What threats has s/he received? What degree of danger is s/he facing and can s/he document it with specific examples, dates, perhaps newspaper or media reports? Will s/he be safer if the threats are made public in their country, or internationally, or will this, in fact, put them in greater danger? Does s/he have allies and if so, what could they do? Does s/he need legal or medical assistance? Can s/he leave for a short while, keep a low profile and stay elsewhere in their own country until the heat dies down? What kind of passport does s/he have, and which countries readily accept it without long visa procedures? Which languages does s/he speak? Does s/he have family members who need to leave due to the danger they may face by being associated with her or him? Do they have valid passports? Can they stay alone? What skills, outside of political cartooning, does s/he have? Does s/he have training or education certificates, or other proof of professional status? Is s/he in good health? Does s/he already have professional connections with any particular countries? Has s/he been published or worked abroad? And so on. Each answer, like a computer game, flags up or shoots down a potential pathway that, in itself, may or may not lead to safety and security.

So-called 'artists-at-risk' are artists who, due to their artwork – a painting, a film, a performance – that upholds democratic or social justice values, are persecuted or threatened with human rights abuse. Their artwork might inadvertently, implicitly or explicitly criticise a government or policy, question a religious dogma or social tradition, be expressed in a banned language or a proscribed musical form. Their work, such as a song, a motto or video, might be adopted by a group opposing current political trends. A film might show people of different genders interacting, a stand-up comedian might mock militias aggravating an unwanted civil conflict, a visual artist might paint a poster criticising wanton commercial takeover and development of previously publicly accessible spaces. A poet might write with imagination and symbolism, a theatre company might work with children and young people to develop their critical thinking skills. These are all real cases where artists have been beaten, arrested, imprisoned, tortured, mutilated, killed. [\[1\]](#)

NGOs and others working in this field tend to suggest relocation as a last resort, when a public campaign, a legal case, fair negotiation with the perpetrator, mediation, or other strategies cannot be obtained or be potentially successful. Relocation, when it is impossible to be ‘temporary’, becomes ‘exile’. And with exile, a whole landscape of new challenges opens.

An artist or writer may have a temporary visa allowing her or him to stay in a country for a limited time to go through training, an artists’ or writers’ residency, to teach, or to show or perform artistic work. If they decide to overstay the visa period or ask for asylum, they may enter into a bureaucratic maze that could take years to resolve. This article will not describe the various possible pathways that depend on many case-specific factors, such as the country in question and national immigration policies. Nor does it cover cases where the artist can benefit from easier possibilities to attain civil status, such as existing dual citizenship, a long-term work or study visa, or by already fulfilling residency requirements. Instead, it will look at some of the obstacles that the artist lacking civil status designation such as ‘refugee’ or ‘political asylee’, may face, as well as some positive examples.

Exile Is a word with dramatic, even romantic, connotations. The isolated artist; the valiant, wronged hero; the suffering family member filled with nostalgia for home. But what does it mean in practice for an artist who has had to leave their studio, gallery, theatre, teaching job, group members, loyal public and social milieu? All artists, no matter where they are, have similar needs: a place to work and materials to work with – be they musical instruments, paints, books or people. They need other artists with whom to network, share concepts, information, problems, try out new ideas, see the work of others and mutually inspire one another. And they need audiences – a public who have access to engage with the work, who can relate to the forms, contents and issues inherent in the work, or if not, feel stimulated to learn about it. The metaphor of the production, or value, chain is often used to illustrate what is necessary: education (both artists’ own education as well as the public’s); creation of the work, production of the work into a form that is ready for showing; diffusion of the work (in other words, ensuring public access to it); and documentation (reviews, critiques, publicity, teaching materials based on it).

[E]ventually only being seen as a victim, an asylum seeker, a refugee, is a trap. This simplistic stereotyping obstructs the respect, recognition and agency of the unique artistic individual, leaving it difficult for them to move on and further develop their work as other artists do.

The relocated artist may already have forged an international career or have strong professional links to their new host country. They may be gregarious, outgoing, curious and good at meeting new people and joining new groups easily. But they also may not speak the language, or they may speak the language but not in all the necessary nuances and jargon needed to enter into the arts world and negotiate with editors, producers, presenters or funders.

They may reasonably start to question their work, asking for whom they are now making it – the home public or the new host country public? And with that realisation, the artist may question her or his own way of working and the work itself. As the artwork was likely the very reason the artist was persecuted and had to leave, s/he may feel it is their ‘raison d’être’ and have a deep psychological need to keep working. Being isolated, without the material means to keep making art, possibly having to live in institutional facilities and with a tiny financial allowance per day, such as in the Direct Provision system in Ireland, they may not have the money, the information or courage to travel, to get out to meet other artists or see art. This can add to the loss of both their self-esteem and their assessment of the value of the sacrifice they have made in leaving their home. Was it all worth it?

If the artist has been traumatised by the experiences they have gone through, they may need psychological support, but be too embarrassed to ask for it, not even know that it may help, or, in some cases I know, it may be additionally traumatising to relive the experiences. Many feel guilty because they left others behind in the dangerous situations they themselves fled, especially if colleagues, friends and even relatives are being persecuted. In some cases, the home audiences or colleagues may even start to criticise the ‘one who left’ as being a now inauthentic voice for them or of capitalising on their ‘story’, now that they are safe and in a different country.

Unless s/he has already made good contacts, has an international profile, or was quite well-known beyond their own country, it is not so easy for the artist to re-establish her or his self in the new host country. Not only if s/he lacks access to the elements of the value chain as mentioned above, but also because it may be quite difficult to go beyond being perceived only as ‘the victim’ instead of the individual artist in their own right. Programmers, editors, curators may be interested in the ‘drama’ of the victim, or even with good will, may wish to demonstrate to their audiences that refugees and asylum seekers are ‘good people’. The artist may need to earn money as well as needing to be recognised by the artistic gatekeepers (those who fund, present, promote artists to the general public). But eventually only being seen as a victim, an

asylum seeker, a refugee, is a trap. This simplistic stereotyping obstructs the respect, recognition and agency of the unique artistic individual, leaving it difficult for them to move on and further develop their work as other artists do.

So, what can be done to mitigate these obstacles? First of all, there are some bright spots, especially in artist-led organisations. [Counterpoints Arts](#) in the UK, [l'Atelier des Artistes en Exile](#) in Paris, [GlobeAroma](#) in Brussels, several initiatives in Berlin such as [CoCulture](#), [Touring Artists](#), [RESTART](#), including a [foundation course for exiled artists](#) who wish to study art at university...these and many more are examples of artists who live in a place and know how to navigate the art milieu, creating or working in organisations that offer to help a newcomer/migrant/refugee artist integrate into the arts community. Although the artists residing in a place may not understand the experience of persecution and flight, there will doubtless be other 'nomads' or migrants who understand what it is like to have to uproot oneself and establish a new life. And as migration becomes an increasingly significant phenomena globally, there are more examples such as the [Dissident Club](#) in Paris, where dissidents from anywhere can meet, listen to lectures, exchange and learn.

In many cases, the artists impacted by displacement have developed a keen sense of cultural and social observation and can act as a bridge between her or his culture and the new host country. Many such artists have created non-profit arts associations, developed their own independent projects or develop projects for existing arts organisations.

For the artist, there is a strong correlation between continuing to work as an artist, and avoiding feelings of depression so they can move forward and develop. Many relocated artists are finding a purpose in volunteering in community programmes, teaching art to children (or adults), helping translate, or creating their own projects hosted by a community group or organisation. It can be a first step in demonstrating one's skills as an artist, and it can be important to one's self-worth. In some countries, education courses are available, and the artist may be able to further their artistic education, or even teach and share their own practice. It also may be possible to work or to volunteer in an arts venue, such as a museum or theatre, or merely hang out there, thus starting to create a professional network. Of course, the more successful the artist was in their home country, the bigger the fall in status if s/he is unknown and unrecognised in the new country, but anyone who moves anywhere and has to re-establish themselves anew will face this. What is important is to put ego, hurt and frustration aside as much as possible, and to try to identify the options, the opportunities, the many small steps that can lead to change. In many cases, the artists impacted by displacement have developed a keen sense of

cultural and social observation and can act as a bridge between her or his culture and the new host country. Many such artists have created non-profit arts associations, developed their own independent projects or develop projects for existing arts organisations. Sometimes these projects are wit and for the diaspora from the artist's home country, sometimes they are not. Both are valid and meaningful. Arts organisations need to resist stereotyping and making assumptions about the exiled artists and instead reach out to them to see them as individuals with unique and rich histories and skills to offer.

I am also a nomad, having lived twenty years in each of three different countries and ten years in a fourth country. I will never, ever, be an 'insider', not even in the country where I was born, but outside of having employment in the new country (which I have not always had the luxury of), I have found that more simple actions help integration. It can be as simple as offering to help at my local village fairs, baking cookies for neighbours, admitting and laughing with others at my linguistic or cultural mistakes, volunteering or making an informal survey of community needs and desires (which by the way led to me creating a new non-profit arts organisation). These small 'human level' actions bring us into different relationships with others. Just as they need to see us as humans, we also need to see them as such. Both sides need to avoid assumptions and identify commonalities. The differences are there, of course, and contribute to our complexity and richness as a human race. But it is firstly, at the level of commonalities, where we can recognise and respond to the humanity in one another.

[i] See also shudhashar.com/artistic-freedom-a-moveable-feast-mary-ann-devlieg/

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