

Many Rivers to Cross

LARAGH PITTMAN OUTLINES THE PARTICIPATION OF ART NOMADS IN DOCUMENTA 15 IN KASSEL, GERMANY, THIS SUMMER.



Taring Padi, dismantled elements of *People's Justice*, behind the Fridericianum Museum at the Gudskul kitchen in Kassel, July 2022; photograph by Laragh Pitmann, courtesy Art Nomads.

THE FIRST VOYAGE in early 2020 was to stage a DIY exhibition in Dublin, 'Transhumance: The Nomadic Artist: Part of this Land'. A need was identified to form a network of migrant artists in Ireland. Art Nomads has become a dynamic mix of individuals from diverse cultural and artistic backgrounds.

Zoom has been a gift, enabling us to meet across time and space; between Cork, Dublin, Tehran, Dundalk, Westport, Skibbereen, Skerries, Singapore, Kinsale and London. We worked with academics, activists, and community leaders and wrote scripts, held skill-sharing workshops and chatty meetings with mentors Annie Jael Kwan and Jesse Jones. Reading *Exit West* (Hamish Hamilton, 2017) by Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid, we were fascinated by his magical literary portal for the movement of peoples.

In February we went with filmmaker Helio León to the Burren in County Clare. The weekend residency was transformative, not only in capturing great footage but also as collective bonding and for many, the first real exposure to the raw, uncomfortable nature of the Irish landscape. We had travelled alone in winter across the land and came together to share a fire.

This year through Singapore/London-based curator Annie Jael Kwan we made contact with the Nhà Sàn Collective from Hanoi and embarked on a mid-summer expedition to documenta 15 in Kassel, Germany, to share the venue at the Lolita night club. Unfortunately, several members were unable to make the trip due to lack of visas, travel documents, or financial support. Six of us left on 1 July, got through the labyrinthine queues in Dublin Airport and made the long, scenic and haphazard journey through central Germany. We lost one person in Koblenz – wrong train, same platform – then the rest of us took the wrong end of a train that split, heading towards southern Germany. hilariously we were reunited on the last night train to Kassel – such is not understanding instructions.

At the WH22 venue the next morning, we were welcomed with a cup of fragrant tea by Linh Thao Dinh in the beautiful leafy green space of Tuan Mami's 'Vietnamese Immigrating Garden'. Cultivated earlier in the year using seeds brought from Vietnam, local people from the German/Vietnamese community were tend-

ing the plants, including people from the Vietnamese restaurant next door. Food was key in how Nhà Sàn were operating their 'Queer House' and its egalitarian ethos; artists shared sleeping, eating and living space during the summer months. Art Nomads was one of many artists groups in this wide ecosystem of documenta 15, sharing resources, expenses from the collective pot, and artist lanyards to access the venues with our new Vietnamese names.

We worked with Linh to host a gathering in and around the house. We showed glimpses of our Irish film journey in a bedroom cleared of floor mattresses, concocted a new recipe of seaweed, potatoes and sausages, invited everyone to a map deconstruction exercise, and offered small shots of alcohol bought in Dublin Airport. Our event 'Rock, Paper, Fire' emerged out of the hot little kitchen alongside Pho soup-making and the drying of bed sheets.

We were invited by Keke from the Scutoid Co-op in Taiwan and a member of Gudskul, to visit behind the Fridericianum museum, where he and his artist friends worked shifts washing dishes. A quick tour of the artist living quarters in the museum revealed a sort of 'occupy' statement, coded in the vivid colours of the fifteenth edition's promotional material.

Another highlight was meeting Agus Nur Amal from Aceh in Sumatra PMTOH, the creator of a contemporary blend of storytelling. His work was innovative, political, and colourful, while at the same time holding a pure joy. We met in the folk story archive of the Grimmwelt Museum. He was familiar with Irish fairy stories and was interested to learn about our blended storytelling project back in Ireland.

One great asset in Art Nomads is the range of languages spoken. Non-native but competent German speaker Tomasz was invaluable and more was learnt about the complexities of the train system through Roxana and Farsi speakers we met. The most vital connection however was between Insaf and the Turkish/Kurdish communities in Germany. These three million people have twentieth-century roots as 'Gastarbeiters', meaning foreign or migrant workers. Insaf found Turkish speaking bus drivers, taxi drivers, train station employees and a local 'kahvalti' or traditional Turkish



Antonio D'Souza (Art Nomads) and audience participants at the performance of *Rock/Paper/Fire*, 2 July at Nhà Sàn's Queer House, July 2022, WH22 venue in Kassel; photograph by Tomasz Madajczak, courtesy Art Nomads.

breakfast buffet, which sustained us through days of art explorations.

With all its mind maps, scheduled sharing, hang-out spaces and political issues, documenta 15 was a rich, diverse, and complicated affair. Stacked behind the museum were some fragments of the dismantled protest artwork, *People's Justice* (2002) by Indonesian collective, Taring Padi, who had been accused of antisemitism. One critic complained of Ruangrupa's lack of ability to mediate and translate complexity in curating the exhibition. At one point a few of us were seized upon by a German self-styled blogger, who saw our artist badges and wanted to talk about censorship and whether the work was anti-Jewish or anti-Israeli.

As a whole, we took away a feeling of being involved in something big – the Global South rather than the North and its hegemonic histories. We listened, looked and watched stories, histories and archives of struggles and creative journeys, many of which remain invisible to the West. For Art Nomads members – who are mostly from non-European roots, encompassing complex transnational journeys – the experience was positive and inspiring.

Laragh Pittman is a Dublin-based socially engaged artist. She is a member of Art Nomads along with: Muhammad Achour, Antonio D'Souza, Hina Khan, Tomasz Madajczak, Roxana Manouchehri, Joe Odiboh, Rajinder Singh, Amna Walayat and Insaf Yalçinkaya.

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Notes:

Art Nomads forthcoming projects for Autumn include:

- 'Samak The Ayyai: A Transcultural Tale' curated by Roxana Manouchehri, IMMA, 16 September.
- 'Karvansera' Artist-Initiated Projects at Pallas – 22 September to 8 October.
- 'Many Voices: Art Nomads' Pallas on Culture Night, 23 September.
- 'Diasporic Thinking' webinar with keynote speaker Annie Jael Kwan on 29 September.