

**Goethe-Institut Nigeria**, 7, Anifowoshe Street, office building, Victoria Island, Lagos, NIGERIA

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## **Art/Space Negotiations**

### **Critical Arts and Its (Non)Spaces in Lagos**

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Art/Space Negotiations is a project initiated by the Goethe-Institut Nigeria in 2022. Its focus is to support discussions on space availability, accessibility, and utilization for critical art in Lagos. Critical art, in this context, may be described as both conventional and unconventional/experimental artistic practices, provoked by societal realities and whose primary aims tends towards analytic aesthetics. Critical art spaces can therefore be described as spaces challenging models of neoliberal and commercialize work ethics that privilege autonomy, independence, and isolation (Olga Kanzaki Sooudi 2020). Critical art however, privileges ideas and visions such as communality, interdependency and sharing.

In Lagos, a city which the Nigerian writer Toni Kan has described as “a carnivorous city,” also best described as a leviathan of sorts, where money is king and all feet hustle to a gold rush, it can be very challenging to create such spaces for critical artistic expressions, which are not immediately lucrative or commercial in nature. The crucial question here is that, since Lagos is decidedly commercial, with economic gain being a significant factor in the development of its real estate, how have cultural workers and artists negotiated, or have been negotiating, for space.

In forums, art and culture entrepreneurs, curators, founders and creative directors of art spaces meet to engage with these questions. Participating art spaces from the islands, the mainland and suburbs of Lagos discuss the engagement with space within the city, the production and promotion of critical artistic expression within these spaces, be it visual arts, drama, music, photography, art residencies, and in relation to other art institutions, libraries, museums, and others.

The two main objectives of the Art/Space Negotiations are:

- To open a new line of discussion for knowledge creation through rethinking space acquisition models outside the competitive market in a frantically commercial metropole. This comes with the questions:
  - Can art spaces be acquired through creative thinking?
  - Could space acquisition for art be a curatorial practice?
- To equip artists and art entrepreneurs with negotiation skills and space acquisition models as they encounter challenges in getting access to spaces. The project aims to assist artist with little or no capital in coping with the challenges of fulfilling their needs, negotiating for space in creating art as they live in a city with heavily capitalist aspirations.

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The first forum held on 25th March 2022, the second on 22nd July 2022, both at the Goethe-Institut on Victoria Island in Lagos. Participants shared different sustainability models for their spaces as well as common challenges in retaining these spaces. A few of the participating spaces have succumbed to the pressure of retaining their physical spaces but have maintained virtual presence, which shifted the discussion to one of the aims of the project: How art entrepreneurs and artists are carving out space – and building audiences – online, especially in a social media semi-regulated by government.

In sustaining their spaces, participants shared different models, since most of the spaces are not commercially run and reliant on funding. Participants also attempted the question on what they think would have to change or be done for their spaces to survive the next decade.

### **Some first insights from the forums:**

When asked about their suggestions if they were to negotiate with the Lagos state government for the need of art spaces, Aduke Gomez, cultural ambassador and historian of Loving Lagos Ltd., believes “that art should be accessible. Art serves the function of being able to change your life. I think that not being able to access art denies our children of learning opportunities; opportunities to dream and imagine themselves in a different space.”

Oyindamola Fakeye, director for Centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA), Lagos, which was founded in 2007, looks at how things work in cities like London, New York, and Paris. She says a lot of the drivers for their tourism are in the arts and culture. Therefore, she will push for a partnership between art entrepreneurs and the government, where both parties are cultural drivers in creating foreign investment. *“I actually believe that we don't have enough recreational activities. I am thinking not just about collectors but about art as education. I will ask that we develop our artists professionally. Educate our government on the roles our art play to other parts of the society,”* she says.

Theo Lawson tells an interesting story of how Freedom Park Lagos came to be. He studied as an architect but with bias to an artistic persuasion. He “found residential projects to be very rigid. You are limited in what you could do because you are bound by very tight sites and there are only so many configurations that you can come up with.” Thus the idea of Freedom Park.

*“It started with the group called the CIA, Creative Intelligence Agency,”* he says. A group of architects, artists and designers who felt it was time to do something for Lagos as a millennium project. *“We came together and proposed different ideas as contributions to what we were going to do for government”.* The idea was to create something in style of New York's Central Park. This was in 1999. But the Lagos state government at the time was indifferent, until ten years later and with a new administration, it finally became a dream come true.

Freedom Park is built on the ruins of Nigeria's first colonial prison, whose site was abandoned for 30 years (from the 1970s to late 2010) before it was converted to an art space.

The idea of a park on this historical site was to preserve the history there. It is today, according to Lawson, a “green space where people come in just to breathe in oxygen, sit in the park and enjoy the peace away from the madness outside. Secondly, people come as tourists to come and look at the museum and the historical space.” And it has been “home to at least 10 art festivals in a year, including film and theatre festivals,” also becoming a hub of sorts, with everybody from all strata in society utilizing the space.

It is such thinking, in creating an art space for everyone, that curators like Jumoke Sanwo of Revolving Art Incubator (RAI) share. RAI, among its other activities, tries to demystify the “notion of art in privileged spaces, where art is located in a space where it’s by invite only and things like that. We want art to go more into the public sphere.”

This is similar to what Vernacular Art Space Laboratory has done in the past, too. One project was the Iwaya Community Art Festival 2016. The way the founder Aderemi Adegbite judged it, “a number of stories we see in galleries actually come from such communities.” But these communities and the people were not able to see what is been said about them. He saw this as “a form of objectifying the people,” which is what artists do, “particularly photographers. We take, take and take and put in a place where the actual people are not a part of the conversation.” So, for the festival, there were exhibitions of “a lot of images and performances . . . and it was so interesting how the people appreciated some of the images.”

But this does not negate the challenges of setting up spaces within certain communities that can become hostile to the presence of what they perceive as an intrusion into their space. Vernacular Art Space Laboratory within the Iwaya community “became the only cultural space in the community,” which was leased for free to locals, has suffered setbacks. Once, his space was vandalized: a lot of books estimated over N500,000 were lost and the library defaced. In some cases, one may say that the problem of spaces is not really about the environment being hostile to the production of art, but a result of an entrenched culture of estrangement to art. As Segun Adefila of Crown Troupe of Africa relates in his interview, “We don’t have a problem of space. It is the engagement of those spaces that is the problem,” he says. “We have parks all over Lagos, but they are empty. We are so estranged from those things. We created them like colonial spaces. It is the intentional, honest, and holistic engagement of spaces that can build this sector.” This is not a farfetched submission. Over the years, a philistine culture resulting from the harsh demands of Lagos (and Nigerian) life, has conditioned art to be seen as a luxury. This is also a problem in the engagement of spaces.

However, Revolving Art Incubator has been rekindling the passion of art lovers. Its members, according to Jumoke Sanwo, now see art “as part of their routine. A lot of them are now able to engage their creative side, which they had sort of left latent based on the ‘hustle’ mentality. A lot of them are going back to writing; some of them are even releasing albums, which is very interesting.” And when asked about the role of alternative art spaces in the Nigerian art scene, both as a stand-alone institution and in relation to more traditional art spaces, she answers that, they are “a catalyst for diversifying space because at this point, we have a deficit of institutions in Nigeria, and alternative spaces are invariably

opening up conversations around the creative process, which is very important.” On a last note, Oyindamola Fakeye, suggests collaboration among art curators. She realizes, “that a lot of times, we often work in silos so we can’t support each other. I don’t think I would have been able to do what I do if not that I reached out to my stakeholders. I think collaboration is key for us to be sustainable and leveraging each other’s skills as well.”

Since the start of the year 2023, the first negotiations of public and private spaces for critical art within the AS/N project have been going on at varying stages of conclusion. Negotiations for residency, performance, exhibition, and studios spaces are tested at the Casino Heights Apartments, the location of the now extinct Casino Cinema in Yaba. Talks are going on at the Nigerian Printing Press building in Lagos Island, at the Center for Arts and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC) in Lagos Island, and with a couple of private real estate establishments. The Art/Space Negotiations conversation continues. The “Space Forum 2023” is slated for October 20th and 21st with the lineup of discussions on “Space Creation as a Curatorial Practice” and “Negotiating Principles for Critical Art Spaces”.