

“MOVEMENT IS THE WORD”

ZAM’s Lara Bourdin in conversation with Emeka Okereke



Emeka Okereke is a Nigerian photographer based in Lagos, Paris, and Amsterdam. A self-professed and self-styled “border being,” he is also the founder and creative director of the photographic project “[Invisible Borders Trans-African Photography Project](#),” which has been bringing a group of ten African photographers and writers on a road trip across Africa every year since 2009. Emeka and the “Invisible Borders” project were recently featured in an episode of Al Jazeera’s six-part documentary series “The New African Photography” (aired April 26 and covered by ZAM [here](#)).

ZAM’s Lara Bourdin recently caught up with Emeka for a conversation covering questions of movement, borders (visible and invisible), and the politics and pragmatics of photography in Africa.

LB: First of all, thank you so much for taking the time to speak to me this Sunday. It's great to have you. I take it you're in Amsterdam at the moment?

EO: Yes, in Amsterdam for now. But soon I'll be in Lagos. And then I'll be in Chad [for the [“Invisible Borders à N’Djamena” exhibition and workshop series](#)].

LB: From what I've gathered, that's what life is like for you? Always on the move?

EO: Always. Always on the move. Movement is the word.



LB: Is this something you enjoy? Something that comes with its upsides, its downsides?

EO: Most of the time I think I feel fortunate to be able to move around. Because it's almost like a shortcut to learn about life. In fact, for me, it's a lot more than just moving around. What I love about movement is that it brings to light the non-linearity of human experiences – that, I find very intriguing. One minute, I'm in Amsterdam speaking English, then I'm in Paris speaking French, and then I'm back home to my family, speaking my language, which is Igbo, and then sometimes English again. And then you go back and forth, and you meet people, some of them older than you, some of them younger than you, and some stupid, some brilliant. Moving shows

that you cannot define your life in terms of one linear way of seeing it. It removes this monotony. It makes you much more flexible. It makes you much freer. You can be propelled into a new reality. Sometimes your reality becomes the reality of someone else. Because if you were just doing the same thing all the time, you would not be experiencing life.

LB: There's a sense that I get from your work – mostly from your poetry – that throughout all this movement, you seek to find a sense of stability in *yourself* as the common nucleus that's moving through space and time. It's also something that seems to be fraught with tension. In fact, in your poems I think you speak a lot about the difficulty of keeping that integrity. Can you say something about this?

EO: That tension is definitely there. Because the more I travel, the lighter I want to become. When you travel like I do, you live out of the box: one minute you're on a couch sleeping somewhere, or in a van stuck in the mud for four days, and the next minute you're in a five-star hotel. None of this actually means anything to me. It does not mean anything, because I don't find my stability in terms of ways of being, but in my own self, what I carry. It doesn't matter where I am, I am always who I am. You can always make who you are out of anything that is around you. You can always be in sync with who you are.

My aim, then, is to make my life into what I call a self-portrait of a disjointed self. Well, what is a self-portrait? It's one image that looks whole – that wants to tell everything about a person in one image. But then you try to talk about a disjointed self – when you try to make a portrait of a disjointed self – you're trying to find something you can hold, something that's just one thing, lightweight, light as a frame on the wall. With every single journey, every single mobility, every single dynamic in there, I want to make myself lighter and lighter, more compact, more portable. I try to sort of bring it down to one thing, one essential thing. If you find that one essential thing, then it can now take different forms in all that movement that is happening around.

One thing that I find is interesting is that I talk about non-linearity, but as I travel, as I do things, as I live every day, it almost feels like everything is connected to each other. Completely connected – to the point that you don't really need to go far out of how you feel or how you are, in a particular moment, to actually find that experience that's going to take you from one step to the other. And then you realize that you don't really need to move – to go to all the museums, to see all the stuff, for you to have that experience. It can just be one thing. One thing that's related to everything that's happened in your life before, and then you find that it's propelling you to move to the next step. So that's the way that I really engage with space, with travelling. It's always about occurrences that just come, because somehow I'm in sync with that situation.

LB: Is that what your photography grows out of – that “in sync” feeling with the space that you're in?

EO: Yes, definitely. For example, recently I've been doing a lot of stuff with Instagram, putting up stuff on my Facebook wall. I love photographing things happening. Every photo that I make, I feel like it was sort of like being in sync with that moment. And I love photographing occurrences, things that just happen around me. I like being in this space where you don't think of photography so much as creating something that's in your head. You have to be in the

moment, and in the right place at the right time. But of course you're not calling it being in the right place at the right time. You're only calling it that after you've made the photo. So the photo becomes the manifestation of that right moment and right time. I love that. That is what I reach for. I'm this thing that's moving around, between spaces and time – and then, at some point, they lock. Perfectly. In harmony. Harmony is the word.



LB: From what I've gathered, you've also branched out to different artistic media, namely video and installation. Can you tell us a little bit about this expansion?

EO: You have to understand that this whole quest for trying to be more and more compact also leads to a point, as an artist, where you can create on the go. This is another thing with me now, this is what I do all the time. I call it the Border Being Project. I'm looking for ways to connect the things that I'm doing. I'm always creating on the go. I don't want to limit my creation to a particular frame. Okay, you have a particular project, you have funding, OK, do the project. But I want my creation to be a diary of every day, a biography strung together through my work. It can be anything every day, and it can be any tool – it can be my professional camera, it can be my iPhone. It could cut across. It could be on Instagram, or my website, or a physical print on the

wall of an exhibition. The feeling that I always constantly have is that I have to stop doing this thing where I always have to create works within the framework of a project.

I want to live it that way, as opposed to [working with the principle] “Oh, this is accessible, so this is what I’ll do.” I’m actually trying to go beyond that way of working. Some artists are known to be activists, and they want to talk about hunger, they want to talk about social injustice, and so on. I believe that all these things are only material manifestations of the essential thing – which is basically that human beings need to keep striving to understand each other much better, to be in the same energy. I’m more interested in exploring those things in between you and I, as opposed to, you know, hinging on the material manifestation of [those things], which is “oh yes, give me some money today, oh somebody died of hunger.” In the end the only thing that matters is the difference between you and me, the gap, the complexity that exists between your world and my world. And we’re not addressing that at the moment.

Invisible Borders is always about the difference between the preconceived notion and freshly acquired perception. There’s always a journey to make between the two – from me to you. Because when I see you, I have a preconceived notion. But when I have eventually engaged with you, then I have a freshly acquired perception of you. Then, the invisible border goes away. The invisible border is basically that misconception we have, you know, that comes from not exchanging with each other. I feel that in some of the work we get from activists, they talk about the results of not exchanging enough; but they are not doing anything to integrate that exchange. I want my work to make you feel like I’m talking about our differences, but in a way that creates room for you to see yourself in it, and to understand yourself in it.

LB: I’m wondering if maybe it relates to what you say in the [manifesto for the Border Being project](#), about your photographic practice as a performance. The interventions you speak of, where you are facilitating engagement between people through your practice – do you consider these to be performative?

EO: Yeah, yeah. They are performative in the sense that, more and more these days I’m beginning to see – especially with the Invisible Borders – that the art is in the tactile interaction between people. And now, if I can make a poem that would be like the tactile experience between you and me, then that is a performance for me. I don’t want it to be like something hanging on the wall, where you think, “Wow, this is a great artist!” No, I want you to feel like you are in it. This is your story, and you share something with it.

In fact, it doesn’t make sense to me otherwise. For instance, this is the reason that I enjoy photographing exterior space, because I know that it’s an everyday space. I’m so intrigued by everyday spaces, because first of all, they’re the most useful, and they’re also the least accessible when you want to dream and be all exceptional and extraordinary. You have to look at this type of space deeply, you almost have to play with it, to be involved in it, and in so doing, design it. And of course, if art is not happening in everyday space, then where else can it happen? What use is it? If you cannot engage with it on a daily basis, in a space that is used on a daily basis, then what use is art? Who are you making it for, for what? Yeah, it’s fine to go to the Venice

Biennale, but that should only be one of the things you are doing. Art is broader than the Venice Biennale or Documenta. I think it really has to be in everyday life, basically because this is where it is performed, where it becomes tactile, where it becomes interactive.



LB: I was hoping now to speak to you about the Al Jazeera series. How did you get involved in the Al Jazeera project?

EO: Well, you know, they approached us, saying that they were making this documentary film, a six-part series on African photographers. They wanted to make a film on us, and it would cover the next road trip. And then we looked at it, and thought it would be easy – but we were also a bit careful, a bit reluctant. I personally love watching Al Jazeera, it's more or less the best of all the devils, you know what I'm saying. So we thought "OK, it's fine, it's cool, we can do this," and we gave them our conditions, and then they were like "OK cool, we can do that." This story had to be told our own way. I really had to stop and get them to agree.

LB: And are you happy with the result?

EO: Yeah, yeah. Because I have to emphasise again, I approved the contract.

LB: How do you see the importance of projects like this series in refashioning the image of African artistic practices today?

EO: I think that it has to be done, you know, [showing] people doing things in the continent. You know, this is the time... we're now getting into the post-post-post colonial era. Post post post. I think it's time now that – we've had all the thinkers, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, C.L.R. James, W.E.B. du Bois – all of these thinkers who have written about slavery and colonialism and pan-Africanism and *négritude* – there have been a lot of thinkers. And when you read their work, you realize that everything they were talking about was calling us to action. So our work is in that line. It's in the action. I think it's also that we're in the era where we don't have to justify ourselves, or seek any validation. There are some people who think they know everything already, but there are also people for whom – just by us being there alone, we don't even need to show any photos, because just by us being there they are inspired. The photos are really only secondary. Of course, we can go to the Venice Biennale – but who will come? Who will they be? That's really not the essential audience. It is those people who, you know, have been told that they cannot get anything from the arts and that the arts cannot do anything for them. So we are sort of like in between there, in between our projects. And there are so many people who feel like this.

A lot of artists are trying to use their art as a tool for social change. I think this is where we should really go. But again, the way to go about it is very important. Now, somebody wrote an article recently and said that the Invisible Borders was an imaginary erasure of the borders created in 1884. I wrote to this person and said look, this is not what Invisible Borders is. We never even mention colonialism in anything we do. Our intent is very simple. In 1884, there was a scramble for Africa. It happened, and neither I, nor the people who are in Invisible Borders were there. So there is no telling who could have influenced this decision or not. But now we are here. We leave the 1884 discourse where it belongs in history. Of course, we cannot erase from the mind, the function of those borders, which are now the countries. So we're going to treat those borders for what they are, which is just a political construct. They have nothing to do with the human relationships between people and tribes. We want to concentrate on projects, on interventions, that will every day undermine the usefulness, or the hindrances and the limitations that these borders are creating. And I think that is how projects in Africa should go about – not to attack those borders. Because when you are doing that you are emphasizing them, you are making them important. You have to invent projects that have never been there before, projects that will shift popular thought. That's how we go, that's how we roll.

LB: My sense from what I have read about the project is that you've also expanded the notion of border quite significantly. Obviously it refers to the political borders and such, but it seems that you also play a lot with the ideas of borders between people, borders between one village and the next, borders *au sens large*. It seems then that you're both emphasising and deflating the notion so that it becomes a productive rather than a constricting or limiting one, which is what we normally think of it as.

EO: Definitely. And we continue, we continue. The road-trip is only one part of what we're going to be doing. Every single project brings us closer and closer to defining what borders are,



and [defining] what position we need to take. And it's beautiful, really beautiful, because Invisible Borders is a platform where you can disclose borders in a physical sense, like physical borders, but at the same time it leaves you all the room to talk about metaphysical borders. "Borders" as a term is really broad. It leaves us lots of space to construct and deconstruct our definition.

What is funny is that the beauty of it all is in this back and forth of trying to construct and deconstruct. That is where the art is. That is what makes the invention. That is what propels us in this movement. It is not in fact in arriving at one answer of what a border is, or solving a particular problem, no. It is in the will, in the act. If you don't see that way then you're not being realistic. The solutions we pick today will become problems tomorrow, which we'll perhaps have to readdress. And the very act of wanting to do that, as opposed to not doing anything, is where the movement is.

Watch the Al Jazeera episode “Invisible Borders” [here](#).

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Learn more about Emeka Okereke and his work [here](#).