

THE BOXED IN PROJECT

ABUJA, NIGERIA

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Figure 1. Federal Secretariat, Abuja, Nigeria, 2020.

As partial and total lockdowns were imposed in different parts of the world in an effort to curtail the spread of COVID-19, it became imperative to sensitise people to their individual and collective responsibilities. This is what Creative Cities Abuja – a collective made up of the alumni of the Creative Cities Project in the Nigerian capital Abuja – set out to achieve with its *Boxed In* pop-up installation and performance, which the collective thought would make a valid contribution to enhancing this social agenda.

Without any external funding or sponsorship, the project was curated by five members of the collective; Joy Iorvihi, Rowland Goyit, Gbenga Soyinka Billz, Stella-Cornel Aghamba, and Thomas Jeffery Seaman. The idea behind the project was to a large extent based on the masquerading tradition which has long been part of African culture. Consequently, both fundamental similarities as well as specific differences could be noticed between the typical African masquerade performance and the more contemporary, contextualised *Boxed In* project.



Figure 2. Federal Secretariat, Abuja, Nigeria, 2020.

In Africa, events and occurrences such as birth, death, initiations, rites of passage, commemorations, acts of worship, seasonal rituals, festivals, and social unrest are all sufficient ground to enact masquerade performances. During such performances, animal motifs and other symbolic elements – specific visual indications as to why a masquerade is taking place in public space – are often incorporated into the costumes for semiotic purposes. This custom stems from the consciousness that every masquerade performance in the traditional African context has a specific reason and purpose, and therefore there is no such thing as a performance for performance's sake.

In congruence with this practice, the collective chose to spray paint large cardboard boxes in bright and conspicuous hues, adding informative messages in simple cursives based on the World Health Organisation's approved guidelines for reducing the spread of the virus. The messages included 'Avoid Crowded Places', 'Wear Face Masks', 'Stay 2 Meters Apart', 'Wash Your Hands Regularly', 'Stay Safe', and 'COVID-19 is Real'. The colourful nature of the masquerade regalia was essential because of the intended purpose of the performance, which was to attract the attention of people in public spaces around Abuja.



Figure 3. UTC Market, Area 10, Garki, Abuja, Nigeria, 2020.

Volunteers wore perforated paper bags over their heads as masks. A major component of most masquerade costumes is the mask. According to the late Christopher Roy¹ of the University of Iowa, 'figures and masks make the spirits visible, giving them shape and substance'. In representing the ancestral spirits, the mask also conceals the identity of the masquerade performer,

thereby enhancing the mystical nature of the masquerade. This stands as one of the conceptual bases for the paper masks worn by the volunteers during the performance in Abuja. Coincidentally, wearing a face mask is in line with measures aimed at curtailing the spread of COVID-19: in Nigeria, wearing a face mask in public spaces is mandatory.



Figure 4. UTC Market, Area 10, Garki, Abuja, Nigeria, 2020.



Figure 5. UTC Market, Area 10, Garki, Abuja, Nigeria, 2020.

Amidst the partial lockdown – which was imposed at the end of March and lasted for over a month until restrictions were eased somewhat, though a curfew remained in place – the painted boxes popped up in a number of relatively busy locations in Abuja, such as UTC Market in Garki and Federal Secretariat in a procession that was similar to that of the well-known ‘Eyo’ masquerade in Southwest Nigeria. The public acceptance of the creative initiative was illu-

strated by the fact that there were individuals who volunteered to participate in the performance. As such, in a carefully choreographed and coordinated movement pattern, the colourful procession of educational boxes attracted the attention of people going about their daily duties. While they were being entertained by the display, they were also compelled to read the messages, culminating in the success of the performance.



Figure 6. Federal Secretariat, Abuja, Nigeria, 2020.



Figure 7. UTC Market, Area 10, Garki, Abuja, Nigeria, 2020.

In order to manage the attracted crowd, the performances were deliberately allowed to last for just one hour in the various locations they were enacted. There were mixed reactions from the people who encountered the procession. While some did not believe the virus existed at all, others complained about the difficulties they faced during the lockdown and expressed their hope that the government

would do something to ease their plight. The total lack of belief in the existence of the virus is what necessitated captions such as 'COVID-19 is Real' as illustrated in Figure 7. Some people could not resist the urge to stop and take photos with the 'COVID-19 masquerades'. So far, with the help of the volunteers and security personnel, the project has been effective and generally accepted.



Figure 8. UTC Market, Area 10, Garki, Abuja, Nigeria, 2020.

Interestingly, Figure 8 exemplifies how effective street art can be in connecting with different age groups and shows the extent to which the *Boxed In* project was welcomed. Whether or not the toddler understood the message promoted by the art, he was in any case attracted to its vibrant and compelling aesthetics.



Figure 9. UTC Market, Area 10, Garki, Abuja, Nigeria, 2020.

Figure 9 presents an interesting paradox. Although the box in the picture carries a clear message urging people to 'Avoid Crowded Places', it proved a major agent for drawing in a crowd, as creative pop-up elements in public space naturally tend to do. The name of the project – *Boxed In* – is also a reference to the lockdown protocol during this pandemic, as people's movements have been significantly

restricted, especially in public spaces. Thus, most of the time they have been boxed in in their homes. In the face of such realities, the project preaches that we indeed play our individual and collective roles by adhering to the recommended measures in controlling the spread of the virus, while we hope and wait for the moment we can return to a healthy and virus-free environment.

1 Christopher D. Roy (n.d.) explains the different dimensions to the existence of masks and masquerades in Africa in his article 'Signs and Symbols in African Art: Graphic Patterns in Burkina Faso'. <https://africa.uiowa.edu/topic-essays/show/38?start=8>.

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