

A Mile in My Shoes

Marie – Size 7 1/2

“Because I was so furious, I told my mother I wanted to invent something that would contribute to changing people’s stereotypical ideas about Africa.”

I grew up with everyone around me - my mum and everyone else saying, “You are unique, and you are very special.”

And I always asked myself, “OK, Why am I supposed to be unique and special, who am I really?”

So, if I’m in a room with 100 people and I am great and unique, then you, or all of you aren’t? That wouldn’t work!

And I think, for me it’s important to recognise that I have many different identities.

For my mother, it was very important that each of her children, and I have a total of 10 siblings, would travel to a different country during their teenage years, to see their own country in context.

My mother let me travel to South Africa for nearly four months, with a friend at the age of fifteen. Everything anyone had told me about that country was conflicted, for example that there is no inequality there anymore between black and white people but don’t go in the 3rd class train carriages because only black people are on those, and they have a lot of disease and don’t go into the areas where only black people live, because there is a lot of criminality there, and so on and so on...

And everything everyone had told me about this country did not reflect what I experienced there.

I didn’t have enough pocket money so I travelled 3rd class in the train, and it was a wonderful, joyful experience and when I got back, it was impossible to convey everything I’d experienced.

When I told adults or teachers about my time in South Africa, no one believed me.

Due to my anger about this, I told my mother that when I grew up, I wanted to invent something that could change the stereotypical view we have of Africa.

And I started “Ein Bild” (One Image), a photography project about images from Germany and African countries with the aim of creating images which weren’t from western photo-journalists, but taken by local people.

We still have an image of Africa – that on the one hand there are the safari pictures, the elephants, riding into the sunset, on the other hand the image is of a massive continent of catastrophes, poverty and war.

And we don’t know what is the reality in between all of that. That’s how the project started in 2013, in Burkina Faso, in the Kristof-Schlingendief Opern Village.

I still remember I bought shoes just before I travelled to the Congo for the first time.

Why I wanted to wear white sneakers in a country where there is volcanic soil everywhere, the ground is very black and dusty, and in part, very muddy due to dirt roads. I always wanted to travel to the Congo, and wanted to do a visual project there, but I knew I needed to have my own life experience first in order to be strong and courageous enough.

The East Congo, in particular, Goma, is the most beautiful place in the world, with incredible nature, fantastic people and an artistic culture, which is truly unique. There was everything else there too, chaos but also order.

It is the coronavirus crisis. We are currently sitting in my living room wearing face masks, thinking about how the world will change, and I keep on thinking of one sentence from my first trip - from Eve. Because what I did first in Congo, was interview artists, and in one of those interviews, I asked Eve why he became an artist, because artists in Congo have an even worse status than in European countries.

His answer was, that when politics fail, and the church fails, and science can no longer have access to communities, then in the end, only the artists are left to form society.

And that was the moment that most influenced me, throughout my travels.

And I began to question, why does society need art, what is important about art?

Two weeks ago, I had a situation as a visual artist that all my artist jobs fell apart within 24 hours, i.e. both - all of my art orders, and my part-time job in a café. What happens when an entire system falls apart?

Within seconds, everything was completely gone. How would I pay my rent, my insurance next month? My other costs, and how would I eat?

I remembered Eve's quote again, why do we need artists, and what happens when a system collapses? What can artists do?

I was fortunate that my call for help was published in a Cologne newspaper..

And then a few days later, over 120 emails in my inbox from complete strangers, and told me that they thought what I said was great and that they would like to support me financially, and that I should send them my account number, so they could donate some money for me.

In the first moment I was overwhelmed, then I thought, OK, I don't need the money for myself alone, others need it too, and I need to think what kind of business or community can I form so that these donations can spread to more people.

And I did that, and with five other strong women, we formed a GBR (a limited company).

And we founded a website, a platform where artists fight for artists, where they collect money, not only for artists, but others who are struggling and to support them.

Coronavirus has also arrived in Africa, and my artist colleagues there work in local institutions where they look after street kids and former child soldiers. These artists are in a situation where they don't know what to do with all the street kids who don't have homes.

And yesterday I got a phone call - an artist reported that the first group with two artists had fled into the jungle with over thirty children because there is no accommodation and they are without any food or means of securing supply.

At the start, when Corona came to Cologne, I wasn't afraid of the virus, I thought, Oh God, what about the humans, how would they change, how would society change?

Since then, the fear of getting ill has hit me, and the idea of not surviving it.

I'm in the at risk group, with asthma, and I've been at home alone without a partner, because I'm single and live alone in my flat. Occasionally I have the thought I'm never getting out of here, I won't survive this and then I'm going to die here alone.

However, I have very good friends who laugh and say, "Marie, you survived cholera in the Congo!" And I think, That's right, maybe cholera in the Congo was a much more difficult situation.

In the cholera situation, I did get to a point where I wasn't sure I would make it.

And I was so angry, because I'm a person who always tries to calculate every risk properly, and to make good, strict plans about what I do and don't do, and lying there at that moment and catching a disease that could mean you don't make it, that really annoyed me initially. My second thought was, just keep going, drink, try to make it.

And of course, you have the thought: What happens when you die?

How do I ensure that I continue to exist past my death? What will I create? What will I leave behind?

At that moment in the Congo, I thought, I have seen so much and experienced so much, that I can think so many new things thanks to having seen and done so much, that actually dying now wouldn't be such a big drama.

For myself, since that situation, I have decided, I will always do things I think are important.

I want to see things and meet people, learn new cultures, getting things moving with people, together.

If the path is important for me, and is close to my heart, then in my head and heart I know, it is not so bad if life were to stop tomorrow.

Time is irrelevant.

I try to pay attention to – not what will remain when I'm no longer here, I want to focus on – what am I doing now? Then, maybe death is no longer so dramatic or awful.