Arts & Humanities

Magic Trip

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A few months before entering the Graduate School of Journalism, Matteo Lonardi ’14JRN visited the Marrakesh art studio of seventy-eight-year-old painter Farid Belkahia. The two men sat at a table upon which a butler placed a tray holding two glasses and a steaming copper pot of thick coffee with vanilla seeds. Before drinking, Belkahia stared straight into Lonardi’s eyes and asked: *Who are you, what are you doing here, and what do you want from me?*

Lonardi had come to Belkahia’s studio, as he had to many Moroccan artists’ studios, to talk about art, cultural identity, and politics. But mostly, Lonardi had come to take Belkahia’s picture. For six months, the Italian native was traversing Morocco, building a portfolio of thirty portraits — men and women, young and old, famous and unknown, painters and sculptors and conceptual artists — that he hoped would crack open a new conversation about the artist’s role in society. Lonardi traveled to Casablanca, Tétouan, Tangier, Playa Blanca, and Rabat, riding in the artists’ cars, sharing their food, watching them work, and photographing them.

When Lonardi arrived in New York to begin graduate school, Belkahia’s questions replayed in his mind. *What do you want from me?* The Moroccan artists he’d interviewed had acted as guides to a culture about which he’d known little. What he did know, he realized, was based on the assumptions of the Western media. The work convinced Lonardi that mapping countries through their visual artists could offer a depth that parachute reporting could not.

Last fall, Lonardi saw a chance to continue his project. The Brown Institute for Media Innovation, established in 2012 by author and editor Helen Gurley Brown as a collaboration between Columbia’s journalism school and Stanford’s engineering school, was offering “Magic Grants”: teams of Columbia and Stanford students, faculty, alumni, and postdocs would compete in a six-month process to build and refine their media-project proposals in hopes of winning one of eight grants for mentorship and financial support of up to $150,000.

Lonardi pulled aside fellow journalism student João Inada ’14JRN. “João is a beautiful cinematographer — just amazing,” Lonardi says. The men started brainstorming a way to integrate video into the project. They soon realized that as artists, they would need a data person to bring journalistic heft and analysis — someone who could determine, for example, whether artists born just after a political upheaval tend to work in a particular medium or style. Inada immediately thought of Alexandra Glorioso ’14JRN, who came to the program with a background in economics, intending to focus on data and investigative journalism. Plans for a multimedia project based on Lonardi’s Morocco work began to take shape.

The first task was to choose a country. “We wanted a place that was a symbol of being misunderstood, and even demonized, in the media,” Lonardi says. “Iran fit that model, and is also one of the oldest and most complex cultures in the world.”

The group set to work on what they called Reframe Iran, envisioning a Web experience that would enable users to feel as if they were stepping into the studios of thirty Iranian artists, using video, photography, and text to tell a new kind of story about Iran and create a comprehensive picture of ways each artist’s creative and political experience intersect.

As they worked on the project, the reality of their limitations set in. For one thing, none of them spoke Farsi. Second, they had to confront their own prejudices. “Like everyone, journalists are biased,” says Glorioso. “We had to find ways to check our biases.” They recruited, as advisers, Iranian cultural experts like the Munich-based art theorist Bavand Behpoor; the curator of the Asia Society’s *Iran Modern* exhibit, Laya Diba; and the New York– based arts reporter and producer for BBC Persian Television, Katayoun Vaziri. The advisers suggested books to read and new artists to search out, while paging through the team’s materials to be sure they were culturally accurate.

A few months in, another problem arose: two artists and a data analyst couldn’t get the technical part of the endeavor off the ground. Then, in February, some of the Stanford engineering students were invited to Columbia for a mixer, and the team met Stanford’s Matt Yu, who saw the potential for using Jaunt VR, a 360-degree immersive video technology. With one month left before the grant proposal was due, they became a bicoastal team of four.

“When Matt joined we had to start over again,” says Glorioso. “This was incredibly frustrating and time-consuming.” Yet four people with different perspectives was exactly what Reframe Iran needed to move forward.

In March, the team learned they were finalists for the grant. Glorioso turned down two investigative-reporting job offers, while Lonardi didn’t even have time to apply for one. The students waited three long weeks until their final presentation in April.

Two weeks before graduation, Reframe Iran was awarded one of eight Magic Grants. (Other winners include Earnings Inspector, which will use algorithms to help detect financial fraud in US companies; Science Surveyor, a tool to help science writers gather information on given topics; and Cannabis Wire, a news site devoted to the intricacies of cannabis legalization.) The team was elated, and relieved. “The Magic Grant was so much harder than school,” Glorioso says. “We knew what we needed to do for school, but for the grant we had to come up with an idea, prove our idea was viable, and pull it off.” Along the way, of course, they’d stripped the project to its skeleton and started over — twice. “The demolishing and reconstructing was so difficult,” Lonardi says, “but it made the idea so much stronger.”

In September, the group will move into an office in the Brown Institute’s sleek new space in Pulitzer Hall. During their year at the institute, they will continue to work to bring their concept closer to fruition. They’ll also go to Paris, Los Angeles, and Iran to begin interviewing Iranian artists.

The travel aspect should be familiar to Lonardi. Back in those artists’ studios in Marrakesh, Lonardi couldn’t have imagined the new technologies and innovative platform that would become the hallmarks of Reframe Iran. No more than he could have imagined forgoing a job search in order to compete for a Magic Grant.

“That’s the risk of life,” he says. “This process took so much effort, I couldn’t even think about not getting it.”



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All categories >