

Pursuit of Reciprocity

How to develop honest reciprocity? That was the main question during the Cairo Residency Symposium, a three-day gathering of 86 representatives of the artist-in-residence sector from the Middle East, Africa and Europe, in March 2009. Trans Artists participated and shares with you this report by Erik Hagoort.

The organizers of the symposium - Townhouse Gallery at Cairo and the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture (Fonds BKVB) - wisely didn't choose for one central theme. Their aim was to provide an open forum to discuss the state of affairs in the residency sector on the intersection of the Middle East between Africa and Europe. In a natural way in nearly all lectures, debates, group sessions and discussions one key issue popped up: reciprocity.

Reciprocity can easily turn into a slogan, covering up differences and limiting its meaning to an exchange of the same. During the symposium however there was a pursuit of reciprocity as an acknowledgement of honesty towards differences in relations. Honest relations between different parties (host - guest - funding organization - nongovernmental bodies), between different scenes (local art scene - global art scene - local communities - art infrastructure), and between different functions and uses (autonomy, education, politics, morality). Reciprocity should value these differences.

Dutch writer Chris Keulemans confided in his opening lecture to the public some of his touching childhood experiences, being raised in Burkina Faso and Iraq. Maybe we shouldn't worry about reciprocity too much, he opted, because you're never able to pay back the many wonderful impressions of staying in different environments. Instead of worrying about reciprocity, he suggested, you'd better cherish your experiences.



Chris Keulemans

The search for honest reciprocity certainly was triggered by the presence of so many Middle Eastern and African initiators of residency programs and workshops. Their participation brought about a refreshing change of perspective: they stimulated a far from neutral thinking about the meaning of artist-in-residence programmes. The enormous diversity of opinions was held together by this willingness to think through what reciprocity means and how residency programmes might fill it in, so as to acknowledge the different positions of the parties involved.



Townhouse Gallery building

An extensive report on the whole symposium can be found on the website of the symposium www.crs.nu

Group session: 'Residencies tied to exhibitions and production'

It seems that more and more artists' residencies offer exhibitions and production facilities, not just as a free option for their guests but as a condition for staying. For these residencies the outcome must be concrete, something to present or show.



Curator N'Goné Fall lead the group session in a stimulating way, mapping a large diversity of opinions.

N'Goné Fall: "Don't hang around as an empty vessel waiting to be filled. Feed the residency centre with all your knowledge and experience!"

No obligation: no commitment?

Some artists and hosts said to favor residencies that ask for a tangible outcome, because it triggers them to be alert and to really get in contact. "I want to be challenged, so there is a serious effort from both sides to be made", said Mahmoud Khaled, artist from Alexandria. He was skeptical of the idea that open, process-based residencies will foster better understanding and mutual exchange. "If you are free from any obligation, there might be no urge to commit yourself."

But what's left of unconditional hospitality? That was the question asked by other participants to this session. There will always be some tangible result, they said, even in the form of a report or documentation, or in the form of the stories told afterwards. So why would you need obligations to trigger your work? Why demanding a specific form of outcome from the start?

Reality is rich and complicated, was the conclusion to this part of the session: the result of each residency remains a surprise to the host as well as the guest. Unconditional hospitality might result in concrete products. A strict demand for production and presentation might very well foster an open process without tangible results.

Showing-off for money?

Another intriguing topic was raised during this session: do residential art centers feel obliged to ask for products and presentations to 'show off' to sponsors and funding organizations?

Several representatives of funding organizations assured that they won't force any residency programme to 'show-off' with tangible outcome. The funds showed a clear commitment to diversity.

Jasper Walgrave, Head of Pro Helvetia Cape Town, said not to push any residency policy in this respect. And Fariba de Bruin-Derakhshani from Prince Claus Fund also advocated an open attitude.



Jasper Walgrave



Fariba de Bruin (Prince Claus Fund): "Of course we are curious, we always ask for a report after a project has been realized. But we don't connect our support to a specific tangible result; we stimulate the programmes we think are worthwhile, and we are quite flexible in evaluating the value of these programmes afterwards. We look at the value and the content of projects, whether the result is tangible or not."

Fariba de Bruin-Derakhshani

SEE-BUY-FLY?

An interesting debate took place about the questioned benefits of residential art centres catering for the 'See-Buy-Fly' curator. Shouldn't residencies stimulate an open mind and offer time for research instead of facilitating the art professional who quickly comes, sees, and goes?

Participants to the workshop warned not to think in stereotypes. All depends on attitudes and expectations. It might be tricky for a residential art center to function as a hub for fast networking, but what's wrong with organizing for your guest concentrated meetings with local artists and art professionals to give insight in the local art scene? A short visit of an open-minded curator might be worth much more than a long stay by someone who just sticks to his or her own fixed set of presumptions.

Conclusions:

- Hosts and guests should be as clear as possible about their conditions and expectations.
- No model can predict what the outcome will be.
- It would be beneficial for hosts and guests to intensify and extend the use of the residential art center as a centre of connection for a wider group than artists alone.

Group session: 'Pressure cooker' versus 'roaming about'

Short-term Residencies: Cultural tourist or resident artist?

One of the group sessions on the second day of the symposium was about the pro's and con's of short-term Residencies. During the session a clear distinction appeared between those who valued the pressure cooker intensity of short-term residencies and those who praised the possibility of long-term residencies to dwell and roam about, to let experiences sink in. Of course nobody is forced to opt for only one model. Some residencies offer both short-term and long-term residencies, some even adjust the length of the stay according to the needs and ways of working of the artist.



Alessio Antonioli

The moderator of this workshop was well chosen: Alessio Antonioli, director of Gasworks in London, and Triangle Arts Trust. Triangle workshops generally last for two weeks, Gasworks' residencies up to three months. Therefore Antonioli could add his experience with short- as well as long-term residencies to the discussion.

And a lively discussion it was!

Cutting a residency in short term slices

"We like our guests to come over, work hard for some weeks, and then go back home to let their experiences sink in. Then they can return later with plans that match the conditions of our residency." That was the fresh sound (and also an advice) of Marilyn Bell - founder of Doual Art in the city of Douala in Cameroon. Doual Art tries to be an experimental laboratory for new urban practices. It's not only about the artist's qualities, it's about matching the artist's ideas with those of the community and with the urban context.

At Doual Art the social impact is part of the game. The artist may come first on a short-term residency. Back home he or she can develop ideas. Later on the artist returns for a second stay of which the length will depend on plans and practicalities. Sometimes the artist returns for a third time. Cutting the residency in pieces has proved to be a fruitful strategy.

People will be on your doorstep all the time

Representatives of residency programmes with modest financial sources were clearly in favor of short-term residencies and workshops. For Reginald Bakwena from the Thapong workshop & residency programme in Gaborone, Botswana, an important reason to keep it short is the eagerness of local artists and the public to work together with the visiting artist: "The social impact is so intense that for the guest it cannot last longer

than a couple of weeks." Others, like Hama Goro (Centre Soleil d'Afrique in Bamako, Mali) and Ali Mroivili (Centre Karthala at the Comoros) took a more nuanced view and said to strive for flexible options for residency periods, depending on the needs of the artists and the possibilities of each visit.

Happy with one week

"If you manage to visit us, you certainly won't have the luxury of roaming about", said Samar Martha, from Art School Palestine in Ramallah.



In Gaza a short-term residency actually is the only way to offer hospitality, due to political circumstances, she explained. "We are already happy if there is the possibility to get people over for one week, just in between outbursts of conflict in the occupied territories. "Artists visiting the Art School Palestine won't have the luxury of roaming about."

Conclusions:

- There is no ideal residency length.
- Be inventive, adjusting the residency length to the conditions and wishes of both the host and the guest.
- Much sympathy went out to the option of cutting a residency period into slices of short term visits, offering the artist and the host more time to let the experience sink in, and work towards the next visit.

Some Discussion Highlights

The programme brought many different views into discussion.

Here we present only a few, to give you some idea of the interesting topics that were debated.

Intercultural Dialogue?

A lively debate developed after the presentation by Khaled, in which he freely looked back upon his experience of staying at three residencies: Funen Art Academy, Gasworks, and Montalvo Arts Centre.

Should the artist in residence be interested in the cultural environment where he or she resides?



"Yes for sure", said Lex ter Braak, director of the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture (Fonds BKVB).

"It's no use to go and stay elsewhere if you're not curious for the culture you visit. That's what it's all about!"



"No, not necessarily", said artist Mahmoud Khaled from Alexandria, Egypt.

"I don't want to be pushed into this frame-work of intercultural dialogue. I'm an artist, not a cultural ambassador. In my experience as a guest I'm too easily framed as an Egyptian artist, who should be engaged in intercultural exchange, whereas I want to focus on artistic exchange!"



Attention: Content!

More than once during the symposium Chuz Martinez, chief curator at Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), referred to the role of artists' residencies as cells of knowledge, as alternative 'academies'. She challenged everyone involved in providing and using artists' residencies not to drown in infrastructural issues. The focus should be on content!

Chuz Martinez

Martinez: "Hospitality is not the same as help. Hospitality is a complex responsibility. When a residential art centre runs for some time, it builds up knowledge, it starts to create a site-specific art history. The centre becomes an 'academy', where guests meet and connect to the knowledge that the centre can provide, and vice versa. It's a matter of change of perspective: instead of focusing all the time on infrastructural issues, we'd better focus on the function of residential art centres as alternative 'academies'."

NO pampering PLEASE

During the symposium it seemed that providers of residential art centres tend to be hyper-concerned about what they offer their guests. Can we generate enough money for our guests? Do we offer enough contacts to them? How can we make the artists' stay as fruitful as possible? What could be the ideal length of stay for our guests? Are we clear enough in our guidelines and applications? Don't we ask too much of our guests? And so forth.



Moukhtar Kocache: "No pampering please!"

Against this caring attitude artists present at the symposium protested. They said not to feel comfortable at all with this tendency of residencies to see artists as vulnerable creative spirits in need of care and attention. Please stay realistic, was their call. Artists don't need to be pampered, they are responsible to make the most out of a residency period themselves. Residencies may ask their guests to take up that responsibility!