

Production and Residency: an interview with Irmeli Kokko

by A. Serino, 21 April, 2012

1) Angela: A few years ago, during ResArtis' 11th General Meeting in Amsterdam, you talked, together with J. Poussette of production-in-residence, about a residency model recently introduced at that time in the Nordic area. Can you tell me something more about this model and the ideas underpinning it?

Irmeli: The idea of AIP (Artist-in-Production) was to create a funding model that would allow artists to produce new artworks. In defining contemporary production in residencies, the starting point was the practitioners' perspective – the art professionals, residency organisations and artists, whom we asked to define their idea of production. Residencies do differ – or at least they should differ – from other art institutions and galleries. We wanted to make a difference between commissioned artworks and the production environment that residencies could provide.

This is what we thought: "The concept of production" can be substituted with the concept of "project", which describes "production" as a more open-ended process – rather than the word "product", which has in it a certain tone of an expected result. The reference could be the French word "projeté" (Jean-Baptiste Joly), which means throwing a projection in front. The group wanted to emphasise the meaning of "open-ended" processes in connection with residencies². Also, the discussed metaphoric words of "raw, cooked and packed" were seen to illustrate the production process, with different phases consisting of research, production and distribution. The production in residencies should concentrate on the first two phases – raw and cooking equates to research and production. The production process in residencies should include time for pre-research and creation with risk, which means the right to fail or to change plans during the residency process. Production residencies should carry out such projects, which cannot be realised inside the institutional framework like museums.

The AIP model would be important because most of institutions, like museums and galleries, show artworks that already exist. On the contrary, there are not that many structures that would support the start of the artistic process, both financially and with planning.

2) Sharat Maharaj defines production as art's specific capacity of 'spawning' new things, as opposed to simply repeating them. "The usage [of the term production] is to help distinguish it sharply from the domain of 'knowledge transfer'. (..) Production centres on a transformative crossover that throws up a surplus, which

² Here I.Kokko refers to the expert group of Nordic Cultural Program/ Module to support Residencies by Nordic Council of Ministers (2007-2011). Members of the group were: Irmeli Kokko, Ragnhejdur Tryggvadottir, Johan Pousette and Kaarel Oja.

churns out something more than what was there to begin with. In this sense it harbours the possibility of spawning something 'other' than what already exists – the logic of invention and innovation. It is about generating data, new objects and ways of knowing; 'Transfer' is concerned with mastering and mining an already identified field with fixed procedures and protocol."⁴ For Maharaj, art is ultimately a field guided by the logic of invention and innovations, as opposed to a logic of replication, or simple management – a field that is however threatened by a continuous systematisation⁵.

Do you recognise the existence of such a tension (between working towards an unpredictable outcome and following known paths) and the risks of 'systematisation' also in the field of residencies?

Irmeli: I presume that residencies as a very flexible model of contemporary cultural production are under the risk of 'systematisation', as all art structures are during the cultural globalisation process. At the same time, residencies are offering a clear alternative: space and time in specific localities, for thinking, experimentation and production based on artistic freedom. The field of residencies is still a field of pluralism and diversity. What I want to say is that the tension is two-fold at the same time. This tension also leads to new forms of production structures.

3) In recent years, you have researched several artists in residencies' models. According to you, what are the main factors that contribute to today's development of residency programmes, from spontaneous gatherings of like-minded people to key supporting structures for the artists (if not one of the main means of their economic survival)?

Irmeli: It is difficult to answer shortly and I feel helpless in trying to understand the whole picture. But I believe that there are many factors: political, art-practice-based, ideological and economical. Below is a quotation from a presentation I gave last November. I hope it will offer some insights for you.

"Recent history since 1990s - unwritten: The new spirit"

In 1995, the first Guide of Host Facilities for Artists on short-term in the Visual Art World was published on the initiative of the Visual Arts Delegation/Ministry of Culture and AFAA/Ministry of Foreign Affairs in France. For the publication, AFAA coordinated a two-year survey aimed at identifying and listing venues located abroad. Around 200 residency-organisations from 29 countries and 5 networks were listed⁶.

⁴ "Know-how and No-How: stopgap notes on 'method' in visual art as knowledge production", Sarat Maharaj, in ART&RESEARCH: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods. Volume 2. No. 2. Spring 2009. On-line at: <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n2/maharaj.html>

⁵ Here in particular Maharaj speaks of the risks of regulation of education, i.e. academicization.

⁶ Armenia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak republic, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States

The selection criteria for the guide was based on the founding texts of the existing range of organisations that had adopted *a certain ethos* - *“the provision of work space for research and experimentation, and the encouraging of creative activity through contacts either with other artists or with a specific environment.”*

Access to artists of all nationalities was also another fundamental criteria for the Guide.

The contemporary residencies were seen to foster exchanges, encounters, and eventual confrontation. Residencies were seen “to provide an arena in which the unexpected can materialise.” The studio “embodies art in transition, not the gestation of the work itself.” The residency was seen as a laboratory, constantly concerned with the creative production or critical reflection; residencies’ purpose was to pave the way for future projects.

This optimism prevailed throughout the art world of the early nineties. Residencies were to respond to many institutional utopias: creating art on site, a laboratory-like working approach, free international mobility and interaction, all in the spirit of the famous Black Mountain College. Residencies made it possible to travel and work beyond the Western map of art, in new continents of art. In the residencies, different cultures met at a personal level. It seemed that this Renaissance through residences would be one of the best achievements of the globalisation of art. Traditional artist residencies, artist centres and studio complexes renewed their programming to fit to contemporary art-practices and new residencies emerged in an unplanned fashion, like a grassroots movement.

Within such development, a special role was played by the growing interest that art institutions had in projects based on site-specific art practices. As described by art critics Claire Doherty and Miwon Kwon, travel and temporary staying became a requirement for artists in order to produce new artworks, and curators started to come up with different curatorial strategies to provide support for artists creating art on site, especially in commissioning new artworks. This in turn also required artists to be willing to travel and create art on site.

As a consequence of all this, since the 1990s, studio work by a resident artist took place in conditions where place and its meanings were understood by the location, its history and the cultural, geographical and the socio-political environment. When in a residence, the artist works in a situation, not alone in a studio.

4) Can we speak today of an 'institutionalisation' of residencies? And if so, do you see interesting directions in this development?

The institutionalisation process of residencies started at the end of the 1990s through the development and the expansion of different mobility programs by national governments, local authorities and foundations, as well as supra-national bodies and the EU. Today, residencies are part of the mobility and art policies of many governments and governmental bodies (in several countries like France, Great-Britain, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Germany, Japan, China, South Korea, Australia and many others). So yes, residencies have become institutionalised.

However, there are many individual enterprises by artists and cultural workers. The field is still very open for new ideas.

5) Kunsthuis SYB is a good example of a rural residency, which stands somewhere between the model of the retreat and that of the rural artists' colony of the past. How do you think that ideas of isolation and artists' community can still play a relevant role nowadays for artists and art professionals, as well as for larger parts of society?

Irmeli: That is an interesting question. This is a topic of a seminar I'm participating in next month in Lithuania [Inter-format Symposium on Remoteness and Contemporary Art, organised by the Baltic-Nordic Network of Remote Art & Residency Centres⁷].

Some thoughts I have now are that: there are new initiatives to create rural residencies that can provide better living conditions and also to create facilities that are not available in cities. Mustarinda, a residency in Finland is such an example⁸. Ecological thread, weariness towards living in societies based on economical and consumption values, the commercialisation of art markets and the search for different lifestyles are some of the motives of the new 21st-century residencies.

6) Are there interesting examples from the past which you think are worth to look at when we think of the future of rural residencies?

Irmeli: I find it quite interesting how much the present situation resembles the period of European and American artist-colonies movement in the 20th century. Nature, alternative lifestyles, indigenous cultures, interaction with local people and cultures seem to foster new inspiration, as happened also earlier.

Personally, I believe that rural residencies have a lot to offer urban cultural workers and thinkers. See how the Banff Centre has defined the special character of their programme by a few basic components, which makes them different from other art institutions: withdrawal; working in a self-directed manner while supported by a community; nature and what it can provide (in past colonies, walks in nature were a central part of the creative process).. All this makes the Banff Centre a good example for the future of rural residency in my view⁹.

Irmeli Kokko(FIN) is a cultural producer who has been working with artist residencies since mid 90's. Kokko is currently lecturer at the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki and was a member of the expert group of Nordic Cultural Program/ Module to support Residencies by Nordic Council of Ministers with Ragnhejdur Tryggvadottir, Johan Pousette and Kaarel Oja (2007-2011).

⁷ <http://remotenet.nidacolony.lt/>

⁸ <http://www.mustarinda.fi/en/society/residency>.

⁹ The Banff Centre is an arts, cultural, and educational institution and conference facility located in Banff, Alberta, Canada. More information on the Banff Centre's Visual Arts programs here: <http://www.banffcentre.ca/va/about/>