

Column, Fogo Island

By Johan Lundh

Residencies appear to be everywhere, and everyone seems to participate in them. Most of them are geared towards artists but residencies for curators and critics are becoming increasingly popular. Over the last few years, I have done my share of them, throughout Europe and North America. Using them both as a tool for research and implementation of exhibitions and events, I have in the eyes of some colleagues become an authority on them. Consequently, this past September in Helsinki, I found myself participating in yet another conference regarding them. Since the early 1990s, the number of artist residencies has grown rapidly throughout the world. According to TransArtists, the most comprehensive website cataloging residencies, there are currently more than a 1000 worldwide, and most of them have cropped-up the last twenty years.¹ Residencies have become an integral part the institutionalized art world, adopting similar formats everywhere. Almost everywhere.

Last summer, I spent a couple of months on a small barren rock off the far Eastern edge of the North American continent, Fogo Island. My ambition coming to the island was to find time to read, write, and prepare for an upcoming exhibition with my collaborator, Canadian curator Aileen Burns. Hiking, fishing, iceberg sightseeing, and whale watching were extra treats. Together with American artist David Kelley, German artist Silke Otto-Knapp, and British artist Hannah Rickards, Burns and I soon realized that by coming there, we had become involved in a social and economical experiment. A rather troublesome and quite exciting experience all together. Until recently the salty waters surrounding Fogo Island were teeming with cod once made European fishermen make the treacherous journey across the Atlantic Ocean. For almost three centuries, the cod fisheries were a resource for fishermen from Great Britain, the Caribbean, France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, as well as the sole source of income for the majority of the permanent residents. However, industrial fishing techniques used by Canadian and international conglomerates, led to a depletion of the cod stock in the 20th century. In 1992 the Government of Canada instituted a moratorium on the commercial fisheries. Over night, the primary means of subsistence was taken off the islanders' tables. In an attempt to breath new life into a dwindling population, the wealthy entrepreneur originally from the island, Zita Cobb, established Shorefast Foundation a few years back, which founded Fogo Island Arts Corporation in collaboration with the National Film Board of Canada.

The Arts Corp's residency program open last year and is fully operational this one, with state-of-the-art studios in four locations across the island, created by Newfoundlander architect Todd Saunders. The Director, Icelandic Elísabet Gunnarsdóttir, explains in an introduction during my first days on the island that Shorefast also is financing the construction of a high-end hotel with its own cultural

¹ <http://www.transartists.nl>

outlets, such as an art gallery, e-cinema and library. The hotel will open next summer and the goal is to attract a few wealthy clients to support the Arts Corp and community initiatives through their stay on the island. Using a combination of natural beauty and challenging culture as means of generate tourism is today an ever-so-popular approach by politicians and businessmen alike. As a user of one of the residencies studios, I felt both alienated and like an alienating force, questioning my position as tool for gentrification of the island, but without being able to do anything about it.

Utilizing art and artists as a tool for socio-economic transformation is not a foreign concept to the local residents. On the contrary, Fogo Island's recent past can be described as a large-scale collective experiment where filmmaking was the catalyst for change. After centuries of British rule, bitter debate and a contested referendum led Newfoundland to join Canada in 1949. Although this freed fishermen from their financial obligations to the British Empire, many people who made their livelihood from the sea continued to live under precarious conditions. Through The Fogo Process in 1967, organized by Memorial University in St. John's in Newfoundland, and the National Film Board of Canada, people from communities across Fogo Island were given video cameras with which to represent their plights. Resulting footage was circulated in neighboring communities and the government to facilitate reciprocal dialogue which would define the different communities' common needs. The crowning achievement of The Fogo Process was the establishment of the Fogo Island Cooperative Society, a locally based and owned fish processing and export system. For the first time in the history of the island, the fishermen took the means of production into their own hands. For an isolated and forbidding place like Fogo Island, where most of the population didn't get electricity until the 1960's, paved roads until the 90's, and high-speed Internet until 2007, this was a major achievement. The later is thanks to Shorefast and essential for any attempt to revitalize the island.

In *The City in the Age of Touristic Reproduction*, art historian and critic Boris Groys argues that its "...today's artists and intellectuals who are spending most of their time in transit—rushing from one exhibition to the next, from one project to another, from one lecture to the next, or from one local cultural context to another."² Residencies in general and initiatives like The Land in particular have the ambition to offer an alternative ways of inhabiting the field of contemporary art. The Land, or The Rice Field in Thai, was established by Kamin Lertchaiprasert and Rirkrit Tiravanija, in northern Thailand in the late 1990's. Lertchaiprasert describes it as "...an open space, though with certain intentions towards community, towards discussions and towards experimentation in other fields of thoughts."³ Both Fogo Island Arts Corp. and The Land share a desire to foster a remote space for creativity that is grounded in a specific context which strive to become economically and

² Boris Groys, *Art Power*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 105.

³ Baan Muang Fu T. Nam Bo Luang A. quoted in Boel Christensen-Scheel, *Mobile Homes*, Ph.D. Dissertation (unpublished), Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo, 2009, p. 19.

ecologically sustainable. That's where the similarities end's. The Arts Corp. strategically uses language the legacy of Fogo Process and Fisherman's co-op but their methods and long-term goals are not evident. As one of the main employers on the island, Shorefast has become a much larger initiative that involves more people, time, and money than a few idealistic filmmakers from Montreal and St John's. The stakes for the inhabitants of Fogo Island are also different today: it is no longer about taking over the means of production—they have to create new revenue streams for themselves. Change is not only inevitable but also necessary. The fish is gone and not coming back anytime soon.

The discussions during the conference in Helsinki, most of the discussions had a pragmatic angle. Most of the participants and the members of the audience were involved in residencies or cultural policy makers. After my experiences on Fogo Island, I have become concerned with what functions residencies serve? All too often art lends itself as a simple solution to a complex query. Fogo Island is just one of the more extreme cases. The proliferation of them over the last two decades has been unparalleled. However, how much of this development has to do with providing for the needs of cultural workers? My perception is that we need to demand more from both the public and private that utilize us for their own cultural and economical gain. After all, without our content, they have nothing.