

Locating the Mobile Artist: from Cultural Diversities to Local Specificities

Reflections on various artist-in-residencies' experiences

Jay Koh and Chu Chu Yuan

The mobile artist has for long become part of the community of cosmopolitan travellers sometimes known as cosmonauts (cosmopolitans+ travellers), together with other players in the processes of globalisation. These artists have been attributed with many labels such as cultural representatives, creative diplomats and agents of change. Although the acclaim may seem a bit excessive, each artist does carry within his/her art practice associations with certain social properties attributed by artistic heritage.

Art has acquired "universalist" properties, which seem to endow arts practitioners with inherent cultural sensibilities and sensitivities. With all these endowed qualities it would seem that in the field of cultural activities, artists and cultural workers do not need to examine or look into acquiring cross cultural skills/intercultural competencies/capacities. This seems to be short sighted, as even in the globalised economy, trans-national entrepreneurs and executives have to undergo cross-cultural training in order to be successful in negotiating business relationships and in developing interpersonal skills, whilst in western medical care, in order to be successful in treating patients of other cultures, medical practitioners have to undergo training in inter-cultural understanding and respect¹.

Critical examination of processes

Art activities have been supported as a major arena for many cross cultural encounters to take place. In view of the complexities and subtleties that influence the outcome of cross-cultural relationships, the need arises to be critical in examining the processes that inform such encounters. Residencies, whether for artists, curators or writers offer much better frameworks for fruitful engagement as compared to other cross cultural art activities such as festivals as they allow more time for relationships to grow, opportunities to explore and present differences, outside of organised

discourses and programmes. In the present time of numerous social conflicts said to be arising from cultural and religious differences, it is important to articulate clear positions and to engage in fruitful and grounded processes with others with differing positions and not to "float" in vagueness and ambiguity. This idea may be unfortunately suggested by the notion of "floating art communities", referring to the growing number of internationally mobile artists, raised in one of the keynote papers during the opening of the RES ARTIS 05 Conference in Berlin.

Artists working in residencies in their host environments are subjected to and framed by a range of existing conditions, values, positions and perceptions on site. How the artists and host organisations are able to negotiate and work within these conditions during the residency process determine to a large extent the success of the residency. Within the limit of this short article we; will only be able to touch on some issues by giving short narratives on the creative potential of artist residencies.

Cultural differences as the starting point

Consciousness generated by each culture perception of the "other" has always required the "other" to be prefixed with associations with and references to geographical site and nationality, in spite of the many discourses and explanations that these associations and references are not productive and inaccurate.

In recognition of the importance of working cross culturally, many art activities now favour cross-cultural exchanges. In the selection process, artists may be chosen based on ethnic background and nationality. Many travel great distances to take up temporary base in an alien environment. When conflicts arise in working methodologies and orientations, the label of the other is still conveniently used as a reason for failure to build a shared understanding and trust through investment in process. In our own residency experiences, we have encountered difficulties with frameworks which could not accommodate the investment of necessary time and energy to negotiate different positions within the process, which then produced much unresolved conflicts that was then signed off as "cultural differences". We should move towards a point where cultural differences should no longer be used as a reason for failure of engagement. Cultural differences is a given in any cross cultural project – and the readiness to

invest time and energy into working out these differences should form the basis of projects involving cross cultural relations.

Timeframe and structure of residencies

In Finland, in our residency with HIAP², we were given much free space and time to pursue activities within our artistic practice. This is good for the artist's individual practices, as it offers time and resource for further development of aspects of practice that residency artists are pursuing. Visits to arts spaces are facilitated, so that visiting artists get a chance to interact with local arts communities. A day for open studio is convened for visiting artists to receive guests into their work spaces. This free and open structure works in a city like Helsinki, and illustrates the Finnish culture of respect for privacy and for giving time for things to happen naturally. As could be expected, many of HIAP's artists return for subsequent terms, as contacts are built up over time. In this sense, the first residency functions as a research and relations-building phase. Time is an essential component for collaborations to take place, and planning residencies on a longer time frame is beneficial for the Finnish cultural context.

In Rauma, a city in west Finland with a UNESCO designated world heritage site, we undertook a residency with the RAUMARS programme, jointly hosted by Lonnstrom Museum. The residency was combined with a commission to make a public art project as part of a regional annual exhibition. The pressure of realising a public art project and producing an exhibition within a timeframe of two months had a negative impact on the residency. The criteria of working WITH the public and NOT FOR the public that informs our working methodology could not work within the constrain of a timeframe and work plan that emphasises end product instead of open-ended process which gives value to investigations, interactions and relationship-building with the community.

From this experience, we realised that a pre-residency process of dialogue and negotiation with the host organisation about the core concepts of the artist's practice, working methodology and the host organisation's expectations would have helped to ease some of the difficulties. This, together with our experiences gained from years working in cross cultural activities, has compelled us to initiate a platform named Bureau for



Portraying Ourselves: RAUMARS: AIR in Rauma, Finland, Swimming Pool

Photo courtesy of Jari Koleh and Uho Chu Raun

Cultural Interconnectivity³(BCI), which will, among other matters, research on artists and host organisations' experiences in cross cultural projects, and compile a recommended list of useful information to be exchanged, as well as a list of questions to be answered honestly by all parties prior to the commencement of a project, residency or collaboration. BCI also encourages active imagining of appropriate models of cultural productions in response to localised needs and conditions.

The importance of "local knowledge"

What could perhaps be actively communicated prior to the residency, although this can also take place intensively during the residency, are the local conditions and local knowledge on site that will impact artists' interactions with members of various local communities. Even though artists should investigate this for themselves, their status as outsider/stranger limits their immediate access into local knowledge and circles. For example, in Rauma, the residents' sense of privacy and shyness towards strangers,

individualist attitude towards work and ownership of work, preference to work with clear and precise directives, distancing from inter-personal consultation, which we encountered during our working process, greatly impacted our interaction with them and the possibilities and direction of our public art project. Even as we understand that host organisations cannot anticipate what artists would eventually undertake during their residencies, this communication would help to develop the working relationship and make the project more responsive to local conditions.

Complexities of human relations, power and interpretations

In Sweden, on a residency organised and financed by IASPIS⁴ (International Artists Studio Programme) we were stationed in Umea, a university city in the northwest region, jointly hosted by Umea Kultur, Umea Konsthogskolan, Galleri Verkligheten and Bildmuseet. The open and youthful atmosphere of the university city was very conducive for the generation of ideas and it was during this residency that Chu Yuan initiated the BCI, as a formalisation of the last 10 years of activities of IFIMA (International Forum for InterMedia Art)⁵.

Umea's art environment is very focused around several main preoccupations and institutions. Central to this is a sophisticated and finely calibrated system that requires much time (for outsiders) to understand and to know its finer workings, that manages the people's interests in a post modernised culture with an accumulated history of welfare. Although the bureaucracy is said to be accessible and personalised, yet the feeling on the ground is that it is difficult to change the status quo as every matter needs public consensus and approval even for it to enter into the public debate. People's dependence and fear towards the system of government is acute yet sublimated. Almost everyone we spoke to incessantly referred to "the system".

With us coming from our base in Yangon, Myanmar (and from Malaysia and Singapore as revealed in the press information) and working in the Umea environment and interacting with artists and arts-related practitioners, would seem that we have come from a less "privileged" position. Yet our host organisation is seen as an arch power within the Swedish art structures by the local communities, a fact that arouse



Bureau for Cultural Interconnectivity: IASPIS's AIR in Umea, Sweden, 2005

Courtesy of Jay Koh and Chu Chu Yuan

active and passive resistance towards it. And our association with this arch power made us representatives of "the system" which privileged some and sidelined others. We were constantly referred to by Umea artists as "the international artists". The terms "local" and "international" seem to bear a deep schism in the minds of Umea's artist communities. This perhaps mirrors the highly evolved bureaucracy that is managed from the centre. The sense that the "local" is not given much positive value, connects with the sense of a pressure to be more connected with outside, which then leads to a resistance towards being connected at all.

Feedback from some local artists was that we are considered as "art missionaries" (ironically from Asia) who have been sent by the "system" to this isolated city far north to deliver the message of how to be more

integrated, updated, progressive and "international". Here we see how local power structures determine local people's engagement with foreigners, in this case foreign artists in residence. Local power dynamics also pre-determine various communities' patterns of interaction - who works with whom, speaks to whom and is open for dialogue with whom. All these lie within the "scope of work" of projects responsive to local conditions.

Pre-determined objectives and agendas

NICA – Networking & Initiatives for Culture & the Arts⁶, Yangon, Myanmar, is the longest running project that we have carried out, beginning in 1997 with Jay Koh's research trip to Yangon. NICA began as a response to the interest and needs of the communities whom Jay Koh came into contact with. After learning about the conditions inside the country, he recognised that the most adequate and relevant project that he could initiate is one that would establish some foundational structures for this country, much in need of resource development and communication



Fatima Lasay from Manila conducting a media workshop, AIR in NICA, Yangon, Myanmar, 2004

Courtesy of Jay Koh and Chu Chu Yuan

with the world outside. Since then, relations and collaborations have been built up slowly with Myanmar's various artists, writers and youth communities. NICA was set up as an independent not-for-profit resource development centre for arts and culture in 2003. It runs an Open Academy programme, which includes training, international resource-sharing, artists-in-residencies and various other supportive programmes for local arts development.

In Yangon, the uncertain and sensitive political and social conditions demand from us a clear agenda to our programmes. NICA requires intense sustained engagement, negotiation and collaboration with various individuals and communities and different levels of visible and hidden power structures. It has required from us to work in dynamic response to a social political environment, and challenged our art practice in terms of theory, practice and production. It has provided exhaustless materials for reflection, self-criticism, discourses and advancement of our practice.

Due to the focused direction of our programmes, we request participants in our AIR and Open Academy - the programmes with foreign participation- to give workshops that are relevant to our main objective of resource-development. In such a situation it is very important that artists do not come with a set agenda and concept of what Myanmar is and what they would like to carry out during the residency. We have experienced many problems with foreign AIRs who came with set values and refuse to accommodate or negotiate with local practices, or who read the local conditions from a western liberal perspective, and go on to use western liberal approaches to try to "intervene" in local situations. Negotiations are seen as compromising their artistic concepts, integrity and criticality. A fixed and universal notion of what constitutes "criticality" undermines what can be beneficial for a very local and different (from the artist's) set of circumstances.

In residencies, it is important that both the artists and the organisers' frameworks remain open and responsive to overarching structures,

dynamics of inside-outside encounters and the local specificities (knowledge and conditions) that bear upon each artists' residency.

We have offered some insights from our experiences in both taking up and hosting residency programmes. We hope that this could contribute towards building up a productive discourse on how to improve existing residency models and frameworks in response to diverse practices, to local specificities, and to changing conditions and needs, so that cultural diversities can work to complement local specificities.

Jay Koh and Chu Chu Yuan are artists, curators and critics. Since 2000, they have been developing models of engagements with publics and communities and conceiving appropriate actions in response to each site, particularly in Myanmar and Malaysia.