

Leaving home to be alone

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Introduction

What follows are observations from a outsider. So, a risky business; for in the worst case scenario these observations are completely alien to you as an insider public, yet in the best case, the result would be what every outsider wishes her observations to be like: to deliver some fresh and thought-provoking insights.

In this talk I would like to address some thoughts concerning the dynamic of international exchange programs for artists, in particular of course, between Basel and Rotterdam. In the end, I hope to arrive at a description of a constellation I think artists are increasingly experiencing.

Between personal development and professional expectations

As a point of reference I happily take Alexandra Stäheli's inspirational essay of the book *On Emptiness*. In her essay, Stäheli points to several tensions between the expectations and ambitions of the individual artist and the outer world. For artists, this world is all but straightforward; and in cultural exchange programs, these tensions become manifest.

On the one hand, the artist wants to understand and develop his or her existence as an artist as such. On the other, the artist has to take into account the expectations inherently attached to a grant given for an international residency. This tension between personal development and professional expectations has become more complicated because, unlike the progressive and modernist belief in socializing and communicating being the prime way for individual growth, there is a growing tendency among artists, and also many other professionals I dare to say, to revalue their sense of growth and emancipation by focussing more on daily routines and privacy. Since these tensions between public and private are non-resolvable and only manageable, to clarify them a bit is a good way to deal with them.

Counter culture and globalisation

Rotterdam Artist in Residence (RaiR) is a cultural exchange program that provides artists with a temporary place to think and work elsewhere. Alexandra Stäheli describes how Rotterdam's Basel connection, represented by the International Exchange and Studion Program Basel (iaab) was founded in 1986 and born out of a desire to create non-commercial artistic spaces. The iaab was a child of that time in Switzerland, marked by political unrest of the *Bewegten*, a group of political activists that strived for a more independent and free way of living. A punk-inspired counter-culture with an anarchist stance towards bourgeois society. The iaab was meant to be a free-zone in which commercial interests, social conventions, and even "the creativity-stifling obligations of everyday life and the official art discourse", did not interfere with genuine artistic expression.

This sharp ideological distinction between the iaab and society did not last long however. During the 1990s, the idea of cultural exchange became intertwined with and framed by the new religion of globalisation. Instead of being a program separate from the conventional world the iaab slowly integrated in this brave new world.

The ideal of cosmopolitanism (which can be bluntly described as the desire to be everyone's neighbour) was the perfect synthesis between 1980s counterculture and the multiculturalist credo of the 1990s. Artists were able to build a social carrier based on pluralism and diversity. They could manifest themselves as progressive while being free of the risk being debased as *bourgeois*. Cosmopolitanism brought the possibility of being critical without isolation. The ambition to be radical had become very much civilized.

Global rat race

Nowadays, Alexandra Stäheli observes, artists tend to become a bit tired of the global rat race. They increasingly long for some quietude. As Stäheli puts it: "After the first decade of the 21st century a kind of exhaustion can be diagnosed even among the racing travel junkies." Hence she wonders, in a world of wide connections and 24/7 communication, what is "the function of a residency?"

Stäheli claims that the artistic ambition is not so much to retake autonomous space from capitalist and commercial pressures, like in the 1980s, but to recapture some

personal quality time. Endless space is being provided by the internet, yet time is scarce, still determined by the cycle of day and night. This situation has generated the ironical yet understandable reality that participation in a cultural exchange program has become a prime tool for realising such *temporal flexibility*. Leaving one's home to find privacy.

We could say, therefore, that the modernist and cosmopolitan idea of individual emancipation by going public and be communicative is turning. Nowadays, it seems that for an increasing amount of people the challenge is to reinvent oneself not in the first place by seeking new places and publics but by finding new meanings and sentiments of interiority and existence. Just to give a rough idea, for the new generation it is more of challenge not to participate on Facebook than to participate. I understand this development as an element of the end of modernism as a social philosophy. The idea that individual emancipation especially benefits from being someone in public interacting with others and receiving and giving opinions.

To be sure, in my mind this process of privatization is all but conservative, static or regressive. Indeed, in many of the artist's impressions laid out in the book, the desire to work relatively isolated was a recurring theme. And certainly, being part of the other artistic dwellers was a important part of this. The essential keywords I came across reading the artists explanations of what staying in Basel or Rotterdam meant for them were "time," "friendship," "concentration," "space," "collective eating," "self-awareness," and of course "working." Hence, the critical rejection of daily routines and private life of the 1980s, is nowadays the fertile ground on which new ways to interact publicly.

Professional pressures

Yet, the process of artistic privatization is very much challenged by growing pressures to legitimize and explain oneself on a professional level. What Stäheli calls "The imperative of global networking," which can be said to be the professional translation of the ideal cosmopolitanism, has lead cultural exchange programs to become highly warranted for building one's CV and artistic carrier. To have visited international residencies is just a very cool and necessary thing to do for the artist. Hence, professional standards have

risen, accompanied by stricter rules of justification, while the growing motivation to leave one's country for a while is to be left alone. There is no such thing as a free lunch.

Moreover, although the standards of professionalism have risen, political support is being withdrawn. At least in the Netherlands cutting finance for the arts has become the next political correct thing to do. Less and less tax money is being redistributed to the arts.

To conclude, the question therefore is how stricter standards of application and justification in cultural exchange programs, on the one hand, and the severe cutbacks of political funding, on the other, will affect the above described process of artistic privatization in cultural exchanges programs. How can the artistic desire to create an international room of one's own with the aim to reevaluate and discover one's artistic existence, survive in a world in which there is a growing scarcity of public funding?

A beginning of answering this complex question lies in a qualitative discussion of the very artistic products of these cultural exchange programs. Explaining how their quality is brought about exactly through the possibility of staying temporarily in a pressure-free artistic environment, is of the utmost importance. In the end, and now I am paraphrasing Dineke van Huizen's wise remark in the book: "You should trust what you can offer and just patiently await the benefits."

Thank you for listening.