

*Paper prepared for the
Second Euroacademia International Conference
Re-Inventing Eastern Europe*

Prague, 15 – 16 November 2013

*This paper is a draft
Please do not cite*

Cultural Diplomacy and the Temporary Studio

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Abstract

Artists play a significant role in re-conceptualizing relationships between Europeans formerly kept asunder by the Iron Curtain. Many artists' residency programs started up since 1989 and provide temporary studio space upon application and acceptance.

The article discusses the purposes, scope, and outreach of such programs. The creative environment within the studio is fertile ground for the interchange of artistic practices, and a place where social and political ideas may be diffused. Artists explore various approaches and media, and absorb cues from one another. Travel to the studio location and time spent in the new cultural context are important. The direct experience of local life, social and geographical knowledge creates a platform for ease in cooperation.

The artwork produced in shared studios often reflects reciprocal influences. Boris Groys observes that art today is created by the masses. Large numbers of contemporary European artists participate in residencies and contribute to the mass artistic production project. As they practice aesthetic equality among all visual forms, they bind the democratic dimensions of art and politics together into a powerful instrument of cultural diplomacy.

Keywords

artist, residency, travel, collaboration, aesthetic

Efforts within the European Union are having an effect on re-knitting the ties between people of the east and west, even if change is subtler than anticipated. Much has been accomplished in the visual arts, particularly by artists' residency programs, and maps with quantitative data can represent loci of interactions across the former divide. Artistic interactions are routinely extended into the social context of each particular residency, and provide material evidence of cultural diplomacy within the wider community.

Artists' residencies provide studio space first and foremost, in which creative individuals can come together to explore common themes, or simply work in the same spaces and in each other's company, absorbing cues of various kinds from one another. The creative environment within a studio is fertile ground for the interchange of artistic practices, however, it is also a place where political and economic ideas are diffused based on interpersonal exchanges enabled by proximity. Personal contact between people of various ethnicities in Europe, and the documentation and cultural interpretation of these experiences have played a disproportionately significant role in conceptually fragmenting the European continent into the west and east, as demonstrated by the American scholar Larry Wolff in 1994 (Wolff 1994, 144-194).

Participating in an artist residency is only one of the ways in which artists of the former east-west divide may share and compare their practice. Some residency programs focus specifically on bringing artists of the former east Europe into working contact with artists from the former west. One such program is Schloss Solitude near Stuttgart, Germany, which has hosted 1201 fellows over the last 23 years. While 481 were from Germany, 38 from the UK and 123 from the United States, 159 were sponsored from countries formerly under Soviet regimes (Akademie Schloss Solitude 2013).

Participating in a residency has become a rite of passage for artists today. Residency participation is a quantifiable matter, and there are hundreds of residency opportunities in Europe alone, with thousands of artists participating yearly (Resartis 2013). In order to prepare a map, showing the number of artist residency opportunities in each country, we immediately meet the need to determine the extent of the geographic entity called Europe, as well as the conceptual division of the continent into east and west.

Winston Churchill's statement about the descent of an iron curtain between the west and east of Europe in 1946 had forecast a geopolitical reality for the next half-century. His pronouncement from deep in the bosom of Great Britain's most enduring ally also engendered a western nonchalance toward those states where communist parties aided by the Soviet Union came to enforce "totalitarian control". Indeed, Churchill made the statement in Fulton, Missouri, seven time zones removed from the "Eastern States of Europe" (Cannadine, ed. 1989, 303-305). Subsequently the Iron curtain curtailed free exchange between peoples and became objectified as if it were not merely a geo-political but a geographic reality.

In terms of art and art history, the concept of Europe as a cultural entity can be gleaned from the literature of art and criticism published throughout Europe prior to 1914. The eve of World War I can be selected as a point in time for comparison to current conditions due to a number of similar opportunities. During the later part of the nineteenth century and up to World War I travel requirements were lax and artists could move about freely across the continent. The ability to travel does not only signify freedom, it is also an underlying principle sustaining the artist residency movement today, just as it enabled the free association of artists in capital cities and in art colonies in Europe prior to World War I.

In art and art history the outbreak of WWI marks the end of what has been termed the "long nineteenth-century." Artistic practice during the nineteenth century included the development of rural art colonies, which can be identified as the forerunners of contemporary artist residencies. Art colonies were first established during the latter third of the nineteenth century, and many assumed artistic significance. (Perhaps the most well known among them is the group including Gauguin at Pont-Aven.) A recent exhibition in Nurnberg at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum focused on 39 art colonies scattered around Europe in the nineteenth century, each of which is shown to have contributed to the formation European art and culture (*Kunsterkolonien in Europa* 2001). These pre-war art colonies prefigure the character of contemporary artist residencies inasmuch as none had purposefully endorsed specific subjects or styles, and artists gathered there at will to work in each other's company for variable lengths of time. Also, some artists returned from season to season, and newcomers, including artists of the younger generation were regularly integrated into the group. One such example is the artist colony at Nagybanya (Baia Mare), in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains (*Kunsterkolonien in Europa* 2001, page).

Art historical studies stress the national character of art colonies functioning prior to 1914. Many of the existing studies about European art colonies were written during the Cold War years, and continued to stress the development of national trends in art. A less politically obliged evaluation of their artistic output is now beginning to emerge with studies like *Kunsterkolonien in Europa* which accompanied the Nurnberg exhibition. The frontispiece to the catalog immediately reveals a map locating those art colonies in Europe which were selected for the Nurnberg exhibition. The inclusion of any specific colony necessarily signifies a certain qualitative assessment, and, even more importantly, indicates the conceptual extent of European art practice up to World War I, located within the geo-spatial framework of actual European geography.

Due to the abundance of available data, it is now statistically possible to tabulate the number of artists' residencies within and without the European Union, characterize each according to geographic location, number and kinds of opportunities they provide to artists, the kinds of media that is available for artists in the studio, how many artists might work there at a time, for how long, and from where the attending artists hail. Such data can be gathered from the websites of residency programs, and also from the websites of organizations which aggregate such data in order to make them available to artists around the world. Two such examples are ResArtis.org and Transartists.org.

In search of a residency, one may sort the data available on the websites according to several criteria. "Residency Profiles" will list countries and disciplines as the two most important categories, but further searches are possible based on the length of residency, economic support, type of studio, working language, and accommodation options. The Transartists website proclaims:

No artist-in-residence program is the same. Each program or guest studio, large or small, established or experimental, has its own background and atmosphere. Working periods differ enormously: from two weeks to six months or sometimes even a year. Some residential arts centers specialize in one discipline, others stimulate a great number of disciplines. There are also a lot of differences in financial

resources, housing and studio facilities, application procedures, selection procedures, coaching and exhibiting (Transartists 2013).

It is typical for a residency program to culminate in an exhibition, and participants are often required to leave one or more works of art behind in exchange for the creative opportunity. Other objectives of a residency may be that artists work collaboratively, or engage in projects that involve the public. Some stipulate only that residents share time with fellow residents, and work on their own projects, as is the case with Schloss Solitude. Others require that the artist remain in residence for the entire duration, and that the project relate specifically to local parameters. Such is the case of the Bridge guard Residency in Sturovo, Slovakia for instance (Bridge Guard Residency 2013).

Among all types of artists' residencies, important distinctions can be made based on the availability of funding. Some residencies will provide the studio and related facilities only, others may also provide materials, and even room and board. Others may charge a fee for room, or board might not be available, or carry a comprehensive charge. But in all cases, some economic benefit is sure to accrue to the artist, perhaps in the form of future sales. Artists often locate funding from additional sources when a residency does not provide it. In addition to funding, just where in the world the residency is located, and what kinds of facilities may be available to the artist, will naturally influence the applicant's choice.

While all artists are encouraged to apply to any residency that list voluntarily on the aggregated websites, some residencies set special criteria for the selection process. The opportunity may be limited to young artists, or those who work in new media, or artists who work outside established norms, or demonstrate potential to create "groundbreaking" or "highly innovative" art. Such selection criteria are driven by the demands of the international art market in which art functions as a rarified commodity (Buskirk 2012), a condition becoming familiar to artists of the east.

According to United Nations figures there exists a clear divide between countries of the EU and those outside of it especially in terms of technological and economic development. This appears to correlate with the number of artist residency programs east of the former Iron Curtain as well. However, the availability of residencies in the east, and organized information about such opportunities via the World Wide Web has attracted artists from the west. Location matters. For normalizing conceptual relationships between the cultures of the west and east, it is important for artists to live, work, create, gather and socialize in villages, towns, and cities of the east. The cultural exchange is unlikely to be equal between host and participant. Since the participant is immersed in the host culture of the studio, the host is perhaps the more effective transmitter. In fact seeking a specific location in the east has often been driven by an existing interest. A ceramic artist described her process this way:

I looked to Eastern Europe for a new travel experience, to a program of which many of my international colleagues spoke very highly. So, in 2003, I applied and was accepted to the International Ceramics Studio (ICS) in Kecskémét, Hungary" (Holcomb 2006, 41).

This artist, like many others, had applied to the program due to its international reputation. She was not disappointed, as Ilona Romule of Latvia was scheduled to be in residence for the same time. The artist was enthusiastic:

I knew her reputation in slip casting and china painting--the ICS is well equipped for such work. With guidance from Romule, I took another direction with my work. I first made models and plaster molds. Next, I slip cast with luxurious porcelain from the prestigious Herend factory, finishing pieces with china paints and luster (Holcomb 2006, 41).

Holcomb's honesty reveals the value of an international residency. Working in the same space during the same period makes experiential learning a reality. Another ceramic artist who also sought to work in Kecskemet at the ICS was drawn there because of her interest in the prehistoric Tisza Culture. Intrigued by the geography and history of the Alföld, her archeological research and studio practice pointed to Kecskemet. She explored local clays and local techniques for making clay sculpture, and responded actively to excavations ongoing at the time in the vicinity of Kecskemet. The new sculptures respond to the

hollow spaces left in the soil, and are made with indigenous processes out of local clay, extracted from the very soil which served as inspiration (Thyssen 2012). The ICS is just one example of successful artist residency programs that attract a global applicant pool. When first established in 1978 it was intended to host artists from around the world and make it possible for artists behind the Iron Curtain to work with them. Since Hungary's EU membership the center has expanded studio space, acquired more kilns, developed a library, and keeps attracting important artists from around the globe (International Ceramics Studio 2013).

While some artist residencies are appended to museums, well-funded art centers, or partially state-supported institutions, most are small-scale enterprises or non-profits that survive as integral to their local economy. The latter depend on local cultural resources, and local sales of art for their economic feasibility. Facilitated by exhibition openings to which the local public is invited, and the sharing of contemporary art practices like installation, performance and video, artistic connectivity spills out of the temporary studio and suffuses into the everyday.

But should the range in artistic quality compel the critic or art historian to develop criteria for qualitative judgments about the value of any specific artist residency program in Europe? Should the established methodology of the Nurnberg study on nineteenth century artists' colonies be set aside? Do all of the contemporary residency opportunities present the same utility as instruments of cultural diplomacy?

According to contemporary philosopher and critic Boris Groys we are now experiencing the cultural condition hypothesized by the mid-20th century artist Joseph Beuys. For Beuys everyone is/can be/ may be an artist, and Groys observes that today we live among masses of artists. This is due, at least in part, to the methods of artistic production today. Artists work with a range of techniques all seen to be of equal value, and their work emerges from the manipulation of a range of images in collaborative and participatory ways. Art today is not created for the masses, but it is created by the masses. (Groys 2010, 13-21). Some of the masses do indeed participate in artist residency programs.

The established role of the artist (as critic) can be grasped through the conceptual work of Balint Szombathy and Milan Muncic, both born in the former Yugoslavia. Their video performance from 1990, titled "Waver: Homage to the Last Video Artwork,"¹¹ interprets an encounter between east artists and works of west artists of decades earlier. The video features the artist Szombathy, from the waist up, as he raises a small glass in salute, 35 distinct times, to honor 35 selected clips of body art performances projected before him.

The clips are by acclaimed artists from the west. Once the clip is complete, Szombathy downs the drink with emphatic motion. Are these salutes for long lost friends, or hastily made acquaintances? The role of the artist as an element within the democratic project of the European Union is theorized by Boris Groys. It is materialized to an extent by the international artist residency movement. Naturally there is a range in quality and a range in effect. But the important recognition by Groys is that quality matters less than quantity. Mass artistic production and distribution marks our global culture, and the content of any unique work diminishes in significance (Groys 2010, 13).

A non-profit called European Artists e.V. can be held up as an excellent example that realizes Beuys' prophesy "everyone an artist." European Artists mentor one another and engage with the local culture. Its members and residents embrace social goals, as surplus generated from the local sale of artwork produced during its yearly two-week residency is sent to support a girls' orphanage in Kenya. A brief survey of art produced during its ten years of existence has just been published in a handsome catalog. Participating artists represent several continents although the exhibition efforts of the group focus on the European Union. More than 2000 works have been produced, exhibited, and many sold. A visual survey speaks to the cross-pollination of artistic practices, even as individual styles can be discerned.

There are thousands of artists each year who participate in residency programs worldwide. In Europe the artist residency program has grown by leaps and bounds especially after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. As contemporary European artists participate in the mass artistic production project, they assert aesthetic equality among all visual forms, and bind the democratic dimensions of art and politics together into a powerful instrument of cultural diplomacy.

Biographical Note:

Tornai Thyssen PhD is a scholar of art history who studied at Lake Forest College and Yale University, and trained at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, CT. She has been teaching art history since 1995, and has participated in numerous curatorial projects. She is interested in the effects of spatial and geographic concepts on society, in art and various modes of representation. Since her Fulbright Fellowship to Hungary in 2006-7 her research interests focus on artists and art movements in former Soviet block countries. Tornai Thyssen is a member of the Consortium of Art and Architectural Historians, the College Art Association of America, and teaches at Emmanuel College in Boston, Massachusetts.

ⁱ Balint Szombathy, *Waver - Homage to the Last Video Artwork* (OSTranenine, Das Internationale Forum Elektronischer Medien, Bauhaus Dessau, Dessau, 1997)

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