



2 keeping up the momentum

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An art mob from 28 countries gathered in Sydney in August, where they were grazed on the rich pastures of the art world, were mustered on to Melbourne to be nourished on equally tasty fare, frolicking with new friends within their own group and with the bloodstock of the host country. For most the smells in the air were unfamiliar, and they seemed to savour them with particular pleasure.

The purpose of their meeting was to refresh their specialised mission, which is not so much art itself but the movement and well-being of global nomads who make art away from home. They are the managers of facilities around the world which host artists in residence, from private homes with a couple of rooms to multi-purpose arts centres with residential studios for visiting artists in all branches of the arts. Res Artis is the association that was formed 10 years ago so that this vast and growing group of organisations could share knowledge and help each other. They meet every two years in a different country, which is responsible for putting on the meeting event – a responsibility keenly sought by the members as the opportunity for networking with this group of peers is a very rare one.

It is a mark of the rapid swelling of the ranks that the Res Artis website, which aims to list all the member organisations with information about what each has to offer, was missing quite a number of those who attended the Australian meeting. This is partly because running the Res Artis association has up to now been a labour of love (the current President, Clayton Campbell

who runs the 18th Street Studios in Los Angeles, announced a generous grant from the Ford Foundation to upgrade the website and to pay a part-time secretary based in the Netherlands) but also because many of the missing are newly joined, mostly from the Southern hemisphere. For the same reason a number of those on the website supply only sketchy details.

There was a particular buzz around the muster this year, which was not just because the vast majority of the members had never been to Australia before, but due to the presence for the first time, of a healthy proportion of members from the South, mainly east and north Asia. This was due to the proactive stance taken by the Australian organisers Nick Tsoutas, Director of Artspace in Sydney and Samantha Comte, Director of Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces in Melbourne who sought grants to bring people from poorer countries, or countries where funds for the arts are low priorities.

This rationale reflects the fact that the movement of artists around the world is seen as a vital force in mutual understanding and not just a career move for practitioners. Why else would the movers and shakers in this world have dedicated their lives to this mission – and it was remarkable how many of the people present were the founders of their facilities, up to 20 or 30 years ago.

On the question of the purpose of residencies and what it is that artists actually do on them there is broad agreement, with variations. The common rationale is that residencies are a kind of retreat from the everyday into which the creative artist can go to replenish batteries and see things from another perspective. Most artists find themselves doing what could be termed research rather than getting down to covering canvases with

paint. Some of the hosts actively encourage artists not to think in terms of making physical objects for exhibition or sale, and are disappointed if the artist simply spends the time doing more of what they do anyway. Others feel that a residency should be used pragmatically to produce some new work, however hard it may seem in a strange environment and in a limited time, and exhibit it at the end.

One of the baselines of a residency in your own country is that you are buying time away from other strategies for staying solvent – part time or full time jobs, or feeling under pressure to make work with commercial appeal. If you are fortunate enough to get a placement where you receive a fee or per diem you are really winning, but the vast majority of residencies around the world do not offer this luxury. In this case the rationale is that you get free space in a situation which offers you something you do not have, like a larger space to work, access to equipment, the company of other artists for intellectual stimulation, or being in a different city or state. Being offered a residency is also a de facto leg up to income in that artists can seek sponsorship from private or public sources on the strength of winning the place. An exhibition at the end of the residency is another major plus, as is having accommodation provided. Again, that is not a common expectation especially with the larger urban arts centres and multi-arts facilities, where artists often have to find their own accommodation and meals but access to technical expertise, equipment, working with others and being part of something big and exciting can all be major compensations for living on takeaway in a hole in the wall.

When artists go to another country on a residency the ground shifts considerably. Away from your own cultural set the rationale is more likely to centre around experiencing another culture, learning the history of the place and people, understanding their artistic heritage and making friends with other professionals. In 'developing' countries it can often play out as interaction with artists or non-artists in the country, including children or students, learning a new craft or skill which is often a traditional one, like Chinese paper-cutting, or making ephemeral works from local materials. Artists who go to the Sacatar Foundation on a historic island near Salvador, Bahia in Brazil, are expected to work with the local community and forget about internet access and Photoshop. One artist worked with local children to collect and clean up garbage off the beach with which they made a huge mural on the walls of the centre. Others might engage with local musicians whose sounds and rituals are the result of the mingling of indigenous, Portuguese and African. www.sacatar.org. A new facility in Lijiang in Southern China is linked to environmental issues.

In poorer and less developed countries, hospitality is almost always provided free, and if the arts facilities are funded by international agencies artists can have their travel expenses paid. One of the new Res Artis members Le Dinh Q from Ho Chi Minh City, got tired of waiting for something to happen at an official level and decided that as he had a house with several bedrooms he would open it up as a residency for two artists, one local and one from an overseas country. His challenge is to select

two strangers who will be able to work together for several months, a matchmaking function which he admits is a bit like organising a blind date. There are as many models for running residencies as there are residencies themselves.

Hosting this Meeting has probably done more to spread the word globally about the real contemporary Australian art scene, warts and all, than a decade of Biennales. Thanks to generous funding from the VACB of the Australia Council and inspired programming by Tsoutas and Comte (with earlier input from Max Delany) delegates were exposed to some riveting speakers (Ghassan Hage, Ien Eng, Lu Jie, Lee Weng Choy) and got to experience what life is like Aussie-style at contemporary art spaces, major museums (eg MCA, NGV), Indigenous associations (eg Boomalli), dance companies and hybrid arts facilities. The Performance Space in Sydney (TPS) hosted a night of events which conquered jetlag once and for all. Gravity Feed, a company who had been in residence at TPS for 6 weeks, invited us to share their work in progress *Monstrous Body*. Disoriented, lost and isolated in near total darkness for half an hour by a space which changes from minute to minute, as an oscillating soundscape and physical matrix is manipulated by 6 brutal men in black who materialise and disappear, the audience first sought the comfort of strangers and later began to participate and create their own tiny universes within the brave new world. *Embrace: changing state* by De Quincey Co had been developed during an ongoing exchange residency, this time in Calcutta with Santanu Bose, Director of Monirath Theatre. Small groups of audience were taken into a closed long gallery where the temperature was raised by a burning gas element on the wall, a mandala on fire, while ethereal sound played over the moist skin of slow-moving protagonists, while banana leaves and muslin were dampened with milk, in bowls of which the feet of compliant visitors were ritually bathed. The dialogue between Australian and Indian artists seems to reward long terms of engagement, with De Quincey teaching the so-called Body Weather workshops while Indian dancers and choreographers invoke an ancient treatise on artistic practice through video images. It will draw to a close in 2006-7 with a dusk-to-dawn performance in both countries.

This was emblematic of the intention of Tsoutas and Comte who had set out to raise the profile of the Asia-Pacific in the Res Artis organisation, offering support to managers who would not otherwise be able to attend, shifting the balance of the 80 or so delegates significantly. Korea, Taiwan, Indonesia, China, Vietnam and the Philippines were collectively as prominent as Europe. There is a smaller gathering in the off years between Biennial meetings, and 2005 sees Rudolph Bruenger manager of the extraordinary Ufa-Fabrik in Berlin www.ufafabrik.de hosting a meeting there from 24-28 September. ☺

The websites of Res Artis member organisations can be found via www.reartis.org.

Image: Tess de Quincey - *Embrace: changing state* 2003/4.
Photo Russell Emerson, performed at Performance Space as part of Res Artis.