# Roads of Mobility

A review of the undertakings of the

## Cairo Residency Symposium

*By Lina Attalah*

*The sight of irregular economic migrants from different parts of the global south reaching the shores of Europe after long risk-laden trips across the high seas has become a prevalent media image. Behind this image lies a narrative of dire need to depart from one's hometown for salvation that lies just outside its confines. In Arabic, the saying goes, "need is the mother of invention." In the case of migrants, need is compelling to invent and re-invent means of mobility, for it is the one natural solution to their unfulfilled desires.*

In the more luxurious setting of professionals, and specifically art professionals, mobility has become the means to fulfill certain needs such as exposure to different practices, improvement of the conditions of production and positioning in the international art scene. While those needs are diverse, the resorting to transnational movement seems always foreseeable. The drastically different scenarios of the economic migrant and the professional artist remind us of how mobility is a basic human attribute. The zeal with which this mobility is sought out illustrates the varying degrees of need for it. But the common resorting to it is elucidating for policy makers about the importance of facilitating transnational movement. Eighty-six participants working in the field of culture and contemporary art from the four corners of the world convened last March in Cairo to discuss the question of mobility in the arts arena. The Cairo Residency Symposium (CRS) was a close cooperation between the Townhouse Gallery of Contemporary Art and the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Art, Design and Architecture (Fonds BKVB), which were moved with the increasing movement of artists across the globe in the framework of art residencies and beyond. Amidst this continuous traffic of traveling art practitioners and cultural workers, the CRS was a moment for pondering the various aspects of this movement.

Artists, art managers, curators, organization directors and funders from Africa, the Middle East and Europe raised questions on the different expectations from art residencies by artists, host organizations and funders. The level and nature of interaction between the artist in residence and his or her host environment were also debated. Finally, evaluation of residencies was put on the table, alongside ideas about possible follow-up steps after a residency ends. Moved by geo-cultural considerations and different areas of expertise, the participants brought about a lively exchange that did not lack divergences.

Before moving to the practicalities of art residencies, the symposium awakened opened with an abstract debate on the notion of cultural exchange and mobility. The mobility of artists is generally rationalized to the public and by most funders by the need for cultural understanding and exchange. In the framework of this debate, Dutch writer Chris Keulemans[1] spoke about the unconditional need for opening borders before people's movement because it is the only way of staying engaged in a highly interconnected world. Keulemans



**Moukhtar Kocache**, Program Officer for the Ford Foundation's Middle East and North Africa Media, Arts and Culture section
(Photo: Tim E. Kaldas)

made his statement while being aware of the paradoxes that surround artists' movement. Such paradoxes include treating artists as cultural representatives of their own nations while they are individuals who do not bear the responsibility of talking on behalf of the whole state institution. Another paradox surrounds the way culturally-sensitive issues are treated during an art residency, where the invited artist has the fresh eye of the outsider to perceive those issues alternatively, while he or she needs to remain cautious about crossing certain boundaries. Keulemans framed the successful transnational movement of artists despite consistent dichotomies and complexities with the concept of hospitality. "Our work [as artists] belongs to the undercurrent of hospitality in this world; an undercurrent that has survived wars, crises and disasters in the past and that will keep on surviving them in the future," he said. For Bassam el-Baroni, curator and artistic manager of the Alexandria Contemporary Art Forum, Egypt, cosmopolitanism can be a conceptual framework to understanding the mobility of artists, who are neither migrant workers, nor professionals working for multinational companies. The concept of cosmopolitanism, which originally translates into "citizen of the world", has undergone certain influences that make it a more Eurocentric concept that does not necessarily equate between all citizens of the world. In the context of art residencies, there are realities that govern artists' movement that can deepen this contemporary concept of cosmopolitanism. "In theory, the residency could be a tool for the emancipation of the almost impossible late capitalist cosmopolitan project, a project that has failed, mainly for the same reasons previous cosmopolitan projects have failed." But there are also ways of altering those realities, such as encouraging residencies between nations of the south and moving away from geo-political dictations into

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1 Chris Keulemans is a traveling writer and journalist, based in Amsterdam. He has written articles and essays about artists in troubled societies, partly on his travelblog www.submarinechannel.com/artaftercrisis.

**Sanne Kofod Olsen**, Director of the Funen Art Academy in Odense, Denmark
(Photo: Tim E. Kaldas)

more independent and investigative artistic endeavours. Moving to the actual practices within art residencies, Sanne Kofod Olsen, director of the Funen Art Academy in Odense, Denmark, mapped the different expectations from this type of mobility. "Today's residencies are much more than a free stay in a foreign city. The situation of today's artists-in-residence programs often depends on various agendas apart from the artists' wishes and aims for the residency in itself… To what degree should the demands and politics of the institutions and funding bodies affect the artistic work?" Olsen asked. For the artists, residencies are platforms of inspiration, network building, prestige seeking and survival, especially for emerging artists delving into a non-commercial and hence less lucrative field. On the other hand, funding that comes from state sources usually seeks the extension of political diplomacy to the cultural sphere and is generally interested in inter-cultural dialogue, especially in the wake of contentious inter-state relations.

Private funders such as banks and corporations are more interested in advertisement and, in some cases, in pursuing corporate social responsibility by spending money in the cultural field. Social development through art and culture also features on the agendas of both public and private funders. For the host organizations, art residencies are a venue to work with different artists, educate the local art scene, elucidate new ideas and contexts, and establish international networks. While these are goals that pertain to the development of the organization's practice and work, some hosts can have less objective and more politicized agendas. Opening up those agendas becomes key to finding meeting points between artists, hosts and funders, while developing practice as an ultimate aim from art residencies.

The debate at the CRS moves from the expectations from art residencies to the actual arrival of artists to their host cities. Various forms of interactions unfold upon the artist›s arrival and include functions of cultural representation and educational exchange. Both functions are subject to divergence of opinions with regards to the degree to which they directly affect the resident artist's practice and production. Meanwhile, Marylin Douala-Bell, founder of Doual'art in Cameroon, expounded on a third level of interaction, which is more concerned with the urban context of the artist in residence. The residency programme in Doual'art is generally mapped on two phases. The first phase is an introductory period where the artist shows his or her work to a diverse local audience and engages with local artists and curators. In the second phase, the artist works on a public intervention for which he or she would plan during the interim period between the two phases. Through this intervention, the artist attempts to make sense out of his or her exposure to the surrounding environment in what also becomes an alternative lens to the hosting community in the way it perceives itself and space. "These residencies are an important contribution for local artists in a country where there is neither a school of art nor access to the evolution of contemporary art in the world. The proposals of the invited artist also offer an opportunity to help the community to put a new glance on its environment and thus to question it," she said.

Once a residency is up and running, there is an anti-climactic moment of return to normalcy, as explained by Alessio Antoniolli, director of Gasworks in London, UK. This moment has the potential to be reversed, given the amount of knowledge and ideas exchanged during the artist's residency. "The questions about post-residency, with its feeling of anti-climax but with an added wealth of knowledge, skills, experience and connections, present a challenge to hosts and artists. Perhaps instead of answers, what is needed is more specifically a series of strategies that allow for the benefits to be sustained and extended," Antoniolli thought. Such strategies include ways of sharing experiences acquired by the artist during his or her residency with the art community back at home in a way that resuscitates ideas and keeps them alive and developing. For the host, a post-residency strategy can be a moment of self-assessment in light of the novel views brought about by the visiting artist, studying potential directions for change and development. More generally, sustaining the communication between the host organization and previous visiting artists is instrumental in capitalizing on the undertakings of individual residencies.

Another integral way of developing residency programs is the design of evaluation mechanisms. Moukhtar Kocache, program officer for the Ford Foundation's Middle East and North Africa Media, Arts and Culture section, spoke about evaluation in the context of "a cosmology of divergent issues associated with residency programs." Questions he raised include the need to identify the motivations of different stakeholders, communication gaps, networking potentials, and partnership cycles. He promoted the need for an honest discourse in addressing these issues, and responding to major questions pertaining to the overall value of residency programs to their hosting countries, and whether those questions are relevant when thinking about individual artistic practice. "We need better data and information about the kind of work that we do, why we exist and our value to society," he said. As a practical model, Kocache proposed hosting the creation of files for resident artists and keeping them constantly updated with the artists' professional ventures. The evaluation technique here stems from tapping into the relationship between the residency experience of the artist and his or her later works in an attempt to learn about the program's impact. Yet, the main evaluation problematic, as expressed during the CRS, resides in the difficulty of measuring a residency program's impact, when in many cases this impact is intangible.

The above-mentioned issues and many others offered fertile grounds for discussion during the CRS. The forte of this discussion was the fact that it brought together the different stakeholders in residency programs, from host organizations, to artists, to funding institutions. The symposium's deliberations departed from real life situations with the diverse experiences of its participants, who also brought essential geopolitical dimensions as they came from different ecosystems with correspondingly different contemporary art practices.