

Practices | Aug 2018

Dialogues Interviews Riikka Suomi-Chande, Program Coordinator of the Finnish Artists' Studio Foundation



Among others, the Foundation owns a studio building in Espoo, comprising a total of ten residential studios for visual artists with one of them reserved for international exchange programs. Image courtesy of Juha Ilonen.

Overview

Dialogues interviews **Riikka Suomi-Chande**, Program Coordinator of the **Finnish Artists' Studio Foundation** in Helsinki (Finland). In this interview we discuss the significant role of the Foundation in providing **essential support to Finnish artists**, including rent-controlled art studios and international mobility grants.

The Finnish Artists' Studio Foundation's origins stem from The Artists' Association of Finland. Why was the Foundation created at first and how has its relationship with the Association evolved over the last 25 years?

In 1990, the Finnish Artists' Association decided to establish a separate Foundation which would focus on the real estate management and the Association would continue to work to secure policy and legislative change to encourage the development of the sector and to provide services to its members, such as for instance legal advice. Parts of the real estate owned by the Association were donated to the Foundation and that was the start of it. Since then, we have had a close relationship with the Association; the Association for instance nominates three members for our Board – three visual artists every third year – so this way artists play a key role in taking decisions in our Foundation. There are three other board members who are more specialised in other issues, such as economics or real estate management.

The Foundation plays a fundamental role in supporting Finnish artists, who are struggling against paying rents in Helsinki, such as most of their peers in big cities around the world.

Our main aim is providing affordable working studios, but we have received feedbacks that our rents have recently reached the limits for the artists. Of course, there are other empty spaces that they can rent also in the Helsinki city center. Private companies and the City of Helsinki have a very positive attitude towards those opportunities. However, in most cases those situations are not permanent. In our case, our aim is to provide affordable but also permanent solutions, so that artists don't have to worry about moving out regularly. We also take care of a certain quality standard of the studios, as for ventilation. In general, if an artist is selected for one of our studios, he or she can both live and work in the same location and it is considered a very good opportunity because it is long term – basically, they can stay there as long as they are professionally active.

Apart from the studios the Foundation makes available, it also promotes international mobility programs.

Exactly. We have our own studio buildings in Italy and in Spain – which were donated to us – and are for Finnish artists exclusively to stay from one to six months. We also have an artist exchange program with one residency in Tokyo and with the Arts Council of Québec. Additionally, we have an open call for international residents to be hosted in one of our studios. Besides these activities, we are active Res Artis members since 1997, when the residency concept kind of first landed here in Finland. Since then, with the support of the local art council, which is the Arts Promotion Center of Finland, we have somehow tried to help developing the field by organising meetings for residency organisations in Finland, collecting data, and producing guides on how to run a residency program. We also have our own activity nationwide as a consultancy.

Your close collaboration with the Finnish art council reminds me of a research I first stumbled upon in 2015, which stated that one of the most successful cases in the public development of residency programs was Finland. The Finnish local government has been strongly supported local residencies as data showed that the presence of residencies generated improved cultural production, creativity and internationalisation at a local level.

It is actually so. The Arts Promotion Center supports our initiatives and artist residency organisations in Finland and they offer grants for Finnish artists if they are selected for international residencies as well. This does not happen only at a State level but also at the city level – some of the cities have been very active in the field of residencies – so there has often been this funding model where one-third of the funding comes from the cities and one-third from the State and then the other one-third from the institution itself. However, on the other side there are so many residencies in Finland – almost 50 residency organisations – and maybe there should be somehow a more focused funding approach rather than being spread so wildly, because as a result all residency programs have a lot of difficulties as to find the funding. The level of certain organisations can't rise when they only get a very small amount of funding. So there are some disadvantages in this model.

You are a private foundation. How does funding work for you?

When we start constructions of a new building, we usually apply for grants from the government and the City. For these projects, we have received one-third of the funding from the City, other one-third from the State and the last one one-third came from the loan we took. Afterwards the tenants, i.e. the artists, pay the loan back in rent. We can use this funding model only when we acquire a building or if do renovations. Otherwise, we have to survive with the rents we get. For the residency program and national coordination tasks, we apply every year to get funding, because these services we provide do not just help us, rather they help the whole field.

The most recent Res Artis meeting took place right in Finland, in Rovaniemi. Have you been there?

Yes, the meeting focused on sustainability and indigenous communities. There were many workshops and lectures on how to assess or transform organisational activities. One of the most interesting presentation I had the opportunity to listen to was the Julie's Bicycle's, which is a London based charity that supports the creative community to act on climate change and environmental sustainability. At the moment, our Foundation has this one building we have just started to construct for senior artists and we have been looking for installing solar panels there. Otherwise, there is a lot to work as to sustainability in our studios.

You just talked about senior artists. What are the demographics of the artists who are staying in your studios?

In our studio buildings, which are meant for living and working, we have both single artists and families as tenants. Recently, we found out that some of the senior artist tenants, who are already retired, might not need as big studios as before, so one of our most relevant endeavour right now has been the development of this new idea of house for senior artists.

Riikka Suomi-Chande is the Program Coordinator of the Finnish Artists' Studio Foundation in Helsinki (Finland).

<http://www.ateljeesaatio.fi/>