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Dialogues Interviews Timo Wright and Anni Fahler, Founders of the Artist Residency Swap (ARS) Project



Image courtesy of Artist Residency Swap (ARS)

Overview

Dialogues interviews artist and producer **Timo Wright** (Helsinki, Finland) and curator **Anni Fahler** (Stockholm, Sweden), who recently kicked off the **Artist Residency Swap** project. Focusing on the issues of **equality** and **democratization** in the art world, their mission is to provide a larger number of artists with the opportunity to take part to a free-of-charge international residency program by swapping studio spaces across the world.

I would like to start our conversation by asking you what sparked the original concept of the ARS project.

Anni Fahler Timo and I had been working together with the Unknown Cargo gallery. Timo had this idea for quite a long time and then about three years ago we were just sitting in a cafe, discussing about how we wanted to do a new project together, and that was the starting point of it all.

The Artsy article from last June reports that you conducted a three-year industry research prior to launching the project. I am really interested in the challenges which – through this investigation – have emerged as the most urgent ones for artists today and how this project addresses those challenges.

Timo Wright I think we had this idea but we weren't actually sure if people also really wanted that. I am an artist myself and this is something that I have been personally wanted to do since 2012. We first started gathering information with some interviews, we sent out questionnaires to some art organizations and we used social media posting to ask people about these questions and, after that. At the same time, we contacted the Finnish Cultural Institutes around the world and with them we would do these test swaps – so we would have people swapping between Finland and some other countries and we would pay for the travel expenses. Throughout those tests, we interviewed the artists before and after the exchange, because we wanted to know more about what they were most afraid of, what they were really looking for and so on. Small iterations would eventually build on what we had learn about it. At the same time, we were applying to some different kinds of funding. We used our first grant to start working on the website. It took a long time because this is absolutely not a commercial project, so it means it always needs some kinds of funding. We did take some time, but in the end we were quite sure there was a general need for it.

Which were the most interesting insights resulting from the data that you collected through these tests?

AF 60-70 percent of the people we interviewed stated that one of the most important dimension of residency programs is its being a social site. At the same time, we were surprised because many people said that this dimension was not really important and they just wanted to have a studio where they could work in peace. We were pleased to confirm that some people would have been ready to let someone else use the studio space they owned even if they kept their body of work in the space. I think this is very important because it demonstrated that they trust other fellow artists and that in the end they would have been willing to take part to the swapping project.

I think it is also important to stress that the core idea of this project is that we want everyone to have the chance to access artist residencies. These programs are sometimes very competitive or not accessible to all artists – especially if you are really young, you have a family, or a disability. In this regard, we also interviewed art students in Finland and they were really happy they would have had the chance to take part to it.

I feel accessibility is a very important issue when discussing about residency programs. Some time ago, Dialogues shared an interview with

artist Lenka Clayton, who is also a mother, and we discussed about the problems that artists have to face when they have a family. Unfortunately, these problems also include taking part to residency programs. Residencies have become increasingly important as a self-development and career advancement opportunity in the art world, especially if you look at them from an international standpoint. Prior to our interview, I was researching the work that you did within the framework of Unknown Cargo gallery and it seems to me that equality and democratization in the art world are a common thread in you work.

TW I think you are right. The work we did for Unknown Cargo and what we are doing with ARS exist to bring art to all kinds of people but also giving artists new kinds of possibilities. With Unknown Cargo, some of the artists we selected could have been really famous, while some others were in a very early stage in their career and did not even have any kind of professional art schooling. We were also trying to get additional funding for them, which is something not very common in Finland. With Unknown Cargo, it was more about who is allowed to present art and in which ways it is possible, whereas with ARS it is more about how to make art and provide a larger number of people with the possibilities to make art. I think it has the same values and same background.

Thinking about equality, we need to recognize that there is still an immense gap between the opportunities of artists living and working in the global South and mostly artists from Western countries. In this regard, ARS provides an easier connection to the international artist network. However artists need money to travel.

AF Yes, that is really true. That is why we wanted to make swap tests and create an open call to fund the travel expenses, but also we would like to increase the number of contacts that we have with specific countries from non-Western areas of the world. In the next months, Timo and I will meet different partners and talk about how to fund the residency and also provide prospective applicants with travel funds.

Who is currently working on ARS?

AF At the moment, it is just Timo and I. We have a long-term collaboration with our graphic designer, who also worked with us at Unknown Cargo, Johanna Hörkkö, and we work occasionally with other people on a case-by-case basis, but mostly it is Timo and I who take care of the everyday work.

You mentioned some funds which you received to support ARS at the very beginning. Which are the organizations that provided those funds?

TW We received funds from the Central Arts Commission and from the Nordic Cultural Ministry. We were also awarded funds for the swap tests from the Finnish Institutes around the world to cover the artists' travel expenses. We worked with the Finnish Institute in Japan, the one in the Benelux area, in Denmark and now we are working with the one in London.

AF We also received some individual travel funds. In the Spring, we were in London and in Copenhagen with Timo to meet with many people from different arts organizations, and we are going to do this again. In October I will go to Paris, then in London and then in some other cities in Europe. Timo is going to Copenhagen and then Berlin. We are really going to see a lot of people and build a lot of new connections.

If we focus on ARS program structure, I can see what makes your project distinct from other residency programs – that is, artists have to fit within a specific, pre-existing framework, which someone else conceptualized a priori. On the contrary, ARS provides an opportunity to put full freedom to develop their own residency framework directly into the hands of the artists.

TW Yes, ARS is giving back to the artists the responsibility of creating their own residency. There is no framework of any kind or boundary. What I think is also different is that we hope that people share information with each other, because the more you give to the person whom you are swapping with – let's say contacts or whatever – the more it is likely you will receive the same – or even more – back from that person. Let's say that in some residencies you are like a consumer of the place, where you are given different kinds of options – you have this and this – but here you have to make your own residency, and also you have to put something in to have something out in a different way than in some other residencies.

Can you see any patterns in the participation flows to the project?

AF Yes. Since we are based in Finland and Sweden, we do work with those countries' cultural institutes and so we have a large amount of people coming from here. We also have a lot of people from the United States and Canada – I can see that around half of them want to go to Australia or Spain or England, but the other half is totally open to all opportunities. Many people from Canada or the United States want to go to Europe, but they do not have a specific country in mind. Many want to come to Finland because ARS is based here and I think this is really good because I would not say that Finland and Helsinki are really popular destinations within the global art map. It is good to think we are contributing to this kind of growth. However, I have to say that Finland is connected with this image of natural landscapes and peace, so a lot of people want to go Lapland or around there.

ARS has been launched recently but you have been working on it for much longer. What are your hopes in the short and long-term?

TW On the long-term, we hope to get more people from a variety of countries. At the moment, we are quite specific to European countries, the United States and Australia. Of course, we also hope that we will have so many people taking part to the project that it will be easy and quick for everyone to find what each of them is looking for. We are definitely looking for a solution in terms of the financing of the project, being non-profit. Additionally, we are working towards helping people to share their insights and information on their own cities and so on. Now it is only happening at a personal level – when two artists meet or connect by email or so – but we would like to incorporate those insights into some form of open source database.

On the short term, we would definitely like to get more information about the swaps that have been going on or that have recently happened.

AF We are also hope to encourage more and more artists traveling within Europe, or mostly Northern European countries, to choose the train when it is possible. We understand it is sometimes more expensive, but we believe it is a very important approach to share.

Timo Wright is a media artist and film maker based in Helsinki, Finland.

Anni Fahler is an art producer focused on fine arts and film based in Stockholm, Sweden.

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