

The Atelier

Beep. A grey plastic key fob, looking not too dissimilar to a tiny mouse, is placed against a small plastic box of the same colour. A single LED blinks and then a huge iron gate that forms the only entrance to the compound slowly grinds its way open. This is how the Academist begins their day, unless of course they happened to have fallen asleep the previous night slumped over a table in their Atelier, in which case they would have more than likely awoken to the morning chorus by the Rijksakademie cockerel or a screech from one of the five resident peacocks.

My atelier is situated in the Ménage. During a welcome tour with about thirty other participants from around the world we were informed by our guide, that previously almost a hundred years prior to our arrival, each of the workspaces in this section of the building were stables for the Dutch cavalries horses. I say something ridiculous like 'It is comforting to know we'll be working in a stable environment!' attempting to break the ice. No one understands. Everyone looks back at me blankly. I feel really English. The floor is grey concrete, the walls are institutional white and the doors are mid-tone grey, obviously. My name is etched into a glass plate on the door, riveted just above the keyhole. The door is large. Large enough to get a decent sized horse through (whether it be a cast or real one) and it slides on runners from left to right. I closed the door behind me and I find myself in a very large 'Atelier'. Two walls are exposed brick with large windows, the other two are white and the ceiling is suspended quite high and made from a transparent PVC type material. In the far corner is an enclosed booth with a grey lockable door leading within. It says in the welcome brochure that this is my office. Sickeningly it boasts, broadband Internet connection, phone and fax. In addition, the office is sound and dust proofed from the rest of the studio. The office's scale is more to what I am accustomed for the size of a studio. I am not aware of it at this moment, but I will come to spend many hours in this room. The front wall of the office has a giant glass window that looks out onto the rest of the atelier; it's a bit like the type of thing you would expect to see in a recording studio. However on the other side of the window there's no drum-kit or guitars, just a fearfully enormous empty white space that looks as if it would gobble up any attempt at art, that I would endeavour to insert. That was my first day. The second and third day I filled by purchasing all those essentials from the Dutch equivalent to 'Pound stretcher', pin-board, bulldog clips, four socket extension leads, mouse mat etc. The fourth, fifth and sixth day I busy my self with settling in and sitting in the cafeteria talking about 'important issues' with other participants. Everyday during the following month seems quite similar. I arrive at the gate hellishly early (my middle-class North of England work ethic still needs exorcising), then sit in my office drinking coffee, I check my email, I read and I make notes for most of the day. Occasionally I glance up to see if my 'Atelier' is still there. And it is. And it doesn't change. In fact I only ever enter it en route to my 'office'. Thirty days pass and I don't make anything. I suppress my guilt by telling myself that I am 'researching'. In addition to researching I am also becoming acutely aware of the 'atelier' from inside my fish-tank-type office. I am slowly beginning to internalise it. That's why I can't start making anything yet. I am weighing up the space. It's as if by looking at it, it's very slowly becoming a part of me, like a second skin. I have a fear of sounding as if I am describing the paranormal as I write this, don't get me wrong I am not some weird spiritual type, however something magical was happening inside that atelier. It seemed to be getting bigger! After the following 30 days there was no mistaking it, it was unarguably larger. Naturally, I couldn't mention any of this to my new peers, fearful that it would result in jealousy and arguments over unfair distribution of space amongst the Academists. It was approximately three months into the residency that the others found the courage to make the first steps with their work, albeit small, a splash of paint here or an hour in the editing suit there. I was still sitting tight five months in, I hadn't touched anything related to the production of art for almost half a year and it was terrifying me. Maybe the problem was that I had left it too long. Of course by this time, my atelier was at least ten times the size of most of the other participants' and making something within those four walls would be an immeasurable task. My studio had grown and with it had my fear. It had become impossible to make anything. How could anything I made live up to the conditions in which it had been produced, and after all what do you make, when you can make absolutely anything? One day during my sixth month it all ended quite simply. I arrived at my atelier, surprised to hear the sound of a Dutch radio

station coming from behind the door. There were workmen inside installing a new central heating system. I was astonished to find that their presence had deflated my atelier's enormity. I made them some coffee, we sat and I briefly spoke about my dilemma with them and then I assisted them in fitting electrical gutting around the skirting board. The following day when they had moved on to my neighbour's studio, I went about cleaning up the debris they had left. I was puzzled to come across a blue and black fishing float with orange and yellow bands around it. I picked it up, examined it and then went across to the sink to wash it. On my way back from the sink I passed a door that was resting on two trestles to form a makeshift table. In the corner of this tabletop someone had drilled a tiny hole, only about 2mm in diameter. I looked at the float in my hand and then automatically stuck the end of it in the table to see if it would fit. The moment I let go, I had finished my first work, 'Workspace Addition #1'. The fishing float stayed sticking up from my table like a little aerial for the following year and a half. It wasn't the best thing I ever made but when I think back about it now, I wish I'd been brave enough to make some more mistakes like that.

Indian summer anyone? I am living in London now. I have been here about three weeks. This is a City I am not used to. It's hot and overcrowded; and it feels violent and cruel in comparison to Amsterdam. Working on the kitchen table is proofing difficult, I am constantly juggling plates, old newspapers and computers. And so strangely, I find myself in search of the same beast I previously found so hard to tame. Today, I am going out in search of a studio.

Some of your questions from the sheet answered

Yes, in fact my working practice as it now stands can be directly traced back to being a profit of my experiences on the fellowship.

The process of producing work on the program differed to the way I would normally produce work immensely. Most prominently in terms of being immersed in the perfect conditions for conceive and realise conceptually and physically very ambitious pieces.

The most surprising thing about being a participant at the Rijksakademie is the sheer enormity of possibilities. At first it's actually quite overwhelming, not knowing which way to turn, should I be making the most of the graphic workshop, or the robotics workspace, artificially light studio, daylight studio, animation rooms. Like all perfect things, it's actually perfectly flawed. After all, when you can do anything, what can you possibly do but stand amongst it all jaw agape, but at the same time, those types of situations are very catalytic. It takes some time to settle in to those types of conditions.

Yes, during my stay in the Netherlands, I collaborated quite a lot, not just in the making of my work, but also within a sort of wider group or society. I ended up teaching graphic design at the Rietveld Akademie in Amsterdam. I did a project with a first year class on urban narratives; we walked around the Amsterdam looking for alternative messaging systems that lie hidden within the City. It's strange, but it can sometimes be the thing that you least expect that are the most fruitful. I was often finding that 'arranged' or 'preconceived' situations, like lectures, workshops or studio visits weren't as motivating as situations that one comes across by chance, like teaching, or sitting in the pub, for example. It's the same with all these type of residencies I guess, you have to venture beyond the perimeter fence of the institution, to realise what's inside. That submersion into real Dutch culture, into real Dutch society and the feeling of estrangement to everything that you've have previously known, to everything that is familiar, for me at least, that is the space in which my work can begin to significantly move forward.

I also collaborated with 'Again' a very well know Amsterdam based graffiti writer. I really wanted to work with him after seeing his stuff up all around the City, so I put an advert in the national newspapers, 'in search of again'. It was a bit like 'Desperately seeking Susan' or something, but amazingly enough he replied, albeit dubiously. We worked on a couple of projects together. I also stuck up some good relationships with a lot of graphic designers, these collaborations were enormous

in scale they seemed to be never ending, in fact a year later I am still involved in them, they were projects that sprouted from small ideas, but it seems that I will be collaborating on them for the rest of my life.

I had no specific research or project to undertake before I set out on my fellowship. The beauty of the Rijksakademie (which was the institution in which I participated) was that its direction and ambitions are perfectly in tune with the direction of most artists' production in general. It's not a place that needs validating by an external body; therefore it has no need for words like 'research', 'production', 'practice', 'practise' or 'development', it's just about making art. After all have you ever hear artists use words like that? I think it's arts administrators language that has been developed to justify something that although seems futile to those that don't understand it, is somehow an important pillar, or intrinsically connected to society. The Rijksakademie is a place where you go to become absorbed in your work. You're there for what at the time seems to be very selfish reasons, quite simply to explore the world through visual language. Therefore, I suppose quite ironically, my fellowship really was research and development in the purest sense.

I suppose the fellowship in some ways has changed me completely, I say this quite tongue in cheek, but sometimes the Rijksakademie feels a bit like a Swiss ladies finishing school. That is that it instils a certain degree of professionalism into you as an artist. Your work is no longer merely your obsession, but it is also your profession. Personally, I have never been so busy as I am now after leaving my residency. Not merely because I am being more productive with my time, but also because by being at the Rijksakademie your work is introduced to a vast array of people without you realising it. As much as it may make you cringe, the only way to describe it is like a sort of viewing platform. It's not a bad thing, if you're happy with your work then it's important that people see it. It was much harder for people to know what I was doing when my work was piled up in the shed in my mum and dad's back garden.

Art is a monster that can't possibly be tamed. Art can't be validated or judged, it can't be taught or learned, it can't be quantified or qualified, it can't always be involved in research or even for that matter in production. It doesn't always require a spectator or a participant. It can be made just as easily in a workshop, or a studio or a library or in the car or at home in bed. There is no yardstick for its qualities of beauty, authorship, ownership, function, cost, worth or use. That's what makes these fellowships important somehow, because finally artists are given time to pay as much attention to making mistakes as making successes, as much attention is paid to play as it is to production. That's why the work of the fellows that participate, should in theory, always be evolving, moving forwards.

The thing I remember the most vividly of my experience at the Rijksakademie? Like any art school or residency program, I quite miss the smell of freshly painted white emulsion.