LOVELY WEATHER: REFLECTING ON THE LETTERKENNY DONEGAL ART & CLIMATE RESIDENCIES AND EXHIBITION

Annick Bureaud, 57 rue Falguière, 75015 Paris, France. E-mail: <abureaud@gmail.com>
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Abstract

The Lovely Weather Donegal Residencies was a Leonardo/Olats art-and-climate project that took place in Donegal, Ireland, in 2010. In this paper, the curator reflects on the art-science-local communities approach taken as a basis for the residencies and the results of the process, which caused her in the end to reconsider the universal versus the specific context for creation.

That morning of November 2010 in Letterkenny, the temperature was mild, the sky was displaying a whole range of grey shades spotted with some blue stripes. The shopkeeper of the grocery store where I entered to buy my daily apples smiled at me and greeted me with a “lovely weather, isn’t it?” I smiled back and agreed, even more so, as I was on my way to help set up the Lovely Weather exhibition at the Regional Cultural Centre (RCC).

Lovely Weather is the title of the Leonardo/Olats art-and-climate project and was coined by Leonardo long-term collaborator Jacques Mandelbrojt, who happens to know very well County Donegal in the upper northwest of Ireland.

In 2009, Leonardo/Olats, the Letterkenny Regional Cultural Centre and the Public Art Project of the Donegal County Council (DCC) joined forces to launch the Lovely Weather Donegal Artists Residencies project, which developed over 2010 and of which the exhibition that took place from 12 November 2010 to 29 January 2011 has been an output.

Framework and Context

Climate change is beyond human scale, both in space and time. What is perceptible to us are its effects—its symptoms, to use a medical metaphor (icecaps and glaciers melting being the most visible). How do you go beyond the surface, the cutaneous reaction, when the scientific data and charts are, for a layperson, as complex to grasp as what they describe? What is the role of art?

Our proposed approach to tackle those issues was three-fold:

a) anchoring the questions at stake in a specific territory: the residencies were dealing with the local territory, the issues emerging from it and how they relate to the overall global system—of which the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull was kind enough to provide a live demonstration in the course of the project.

b) providing a three-pronged approach to the residencies: they were not only art residencies, but the artists had to deal also with scientists relevant to their projects and engage with local communities; they were art and science projects in dialogue with local groups and communities.

c) and, from the very beginning, John Cunningham, the artistic director and curator of the RCC, and I agreed that the process was at the core of the project. If we were targeting a “central” and “final” exhibition at the RCC, we agreed that it could take the form of a documentation on in situ works if this was what the artists wanted to achieve.

We issued an international call and received over 100 proposals from all over the world. Five residencies were proposed, one in each electoral area of County Donegal. It is interesting to note that this follows a political zoning and not any geographical, geological, ecological or even economical one. Although it might seem a perfect contradiction with the globality of climate change and the necessity of global political decisions, for me it was interesting, as it embedded it at a political level in the immediate reach of the population. The artists had to apply to one of the five areas. A jury composed of Sean Hannigan, director of RCC; Terre Duffy, public art manager of the DCC; Arantxa Mendilharat, an expert in art and science residencies; John Cunningham and myself as the co-curators of the project; and a representative of the specific electoral area for each residency selected the artists and projects. It was the first time I had sat on an art jury with politicians, and I was happily surprised by how most of them were really concerned and how one of them championed one project.

Results

The exhibition was one of the results. We had started the residencies with a workshop, and we ended it with a public conference. A brochure together with a DVD and the websites of Leonardo/Olats [1], the RCC and the artists document the projects.

The five artworks that were created are very different in their media, approaches, topics, methodologies and aesthetics. What was very positive to me is that all of them avoided providing any direct, literal, didactic explanation. It is by being intriguing, challenging and seducing as artworks that they engage with the audience, each encompassing different emotions and feelings.

Seema Goel’s Carbon Footprint knitting machine is playful, while...
Antony Lyons's *Weather Proof* is more on a meditative, slow, reflexive approach. The League of Imaginary Scientists’ *Irish Rover* weaves fantasy with serious science, and Peter d’Agostino’s *WorldWide Walks/Dún na nGall* weaves real physical walks with virtual online paths. Softday's *Marbh Chrios (Dead Zone)* music composition and event generate a gloomy and grim emotion challenged by the cheerful and blythe performance of the Saint Catherine's marching band. Beyond the first immediate perception, all embody different layers of emotions and meanings, expressing the very complexity of the issues they are dealing with.

On a formal level, some of the projects are multimodal: Softday's piece includes a site-specific concert and event involving different groups, a video work documenting it and constituting a basis for other performances, a music composition and an original e-publishing object; Seema Goel's work is as much the spinning and knitting workshops as the installation where the gallery work can be viewed as an extension of the process-based action. This raises the question of the relation between the gallery and the territory, the (cultural) inside and the (natural) outside. By having a turfstack being built in the traditional manner in the exhibition space, Antony Lyons is more than reflecting on the Donegal landscape and the economical, ecological and socio-political issues related to peat; he is bringing an actual sample of the “real” in the gallery space, un-modified. This irruption inside of what belongs to the outside, acts, in a way, as the opposite of land art, revealing what it is: a cultural natural object. More generally, many of the works can be viewed as traces, residue of the process that took place during the artists’ presence in Donegal, the objects in the exhibition becoming like archeological fragmented artifacts testifying to a much bigger, wider and richer reality. However, it is in bringing them into the artistic and artificial settings of the gallery that they received and unfolded all their meanings.

Most of climate change discourse, as well as the artworks relating to it, tend to focus on the global systems and responsibilities: what you do here has an impact there, everything is connected to everything else. Likewise, the discourses, market and exhibitions system in contemporary art have been globalised, and artworks created in different contexts are supposed to have a universal meaning and be shared the same way everywhere. Locally, each work in the *Lovely Weather* exhibition had an immediate, almost visceral, meaning for the audience. Outside Ireland, many of them would require a much longer paratext explaining the context and the intention, with the risk of an aestheticization and sterilization of both the art and the reality it is reflecting upon. For me, one challenging question that emerged is: Does a specific artwork have to be universal? An even more challenging question in that I don't live in Ireland, didn't know about Donegal before and have learned about this land and to care about it precisely through those artworks.

I believe that one of the interesting points in the *Lovely Weather* project is that it has been deeply rooted in its territory. And that may be why the residencies went beyond all our expectations, with some of the projects having prolongations: Some of the participants in Seema Goel's project have started a wool co-op, Antony Lyons is planning to extend his project with works implanted on the territory (as opposed to the gallery setting) and Softday has submitted proposals to explore how other Dead Zones sound elsewhere, in other seas.

Why should there be art residencies related to climate change? Why should climate be a topic for art? I don't think that art has to address all the issues societies are facing. But art has always depicted our points of views and visions about nature and our relations to it. Even if it is on the dark side, climate change appears as their latest instance.

Reference

Fig. 2. Building the turf stack in the RCC Gallery. (Photo © Annick Bureaud)