

## SHELTERING FROM THE STORM—ARTISTIC RESIDENCIES AND ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

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### Abstract

Conditions of crisis can be fertile soil for social transformation. The Lovely Weather project in Donegal, northwest Ireland, brought artists into residence in localities where changing socio-economic and awareness of shifting environmental conditions opened up space for different cooperative relations. Donegal, bounded by the Atlantic, sitting between the north and south of Ireland, is an ambiguous in-between region with strong yet undervalued traditions relating to the sea and land. Drawing from a keynote presentation, this paper considers how residency models can dynamically connect poetics of place with broader environmental influences.

### In Plane View

I flew across from London to Dublin on 11th November in the middle of Storm Carmen, which reached 140 mph winds later that afternoon [1]. Though there is no real evidence that this had any relationship to either the Lovely Weather residencies, which we were going to Donegal to discuss, or to the fact that I had a brief glimpse of Alice Cooper at the airport, before seeing all members of the real Gorillaz band on the plane beside me, it does all in all confirm the power of Nature, which as Octavio Paz (referencing Breton) tells us, ‘is a language and language itself is a double of nature’ [2].

Whoever dreamed up the Lovely Weather title, it was also no surprise to me to find myself at the close of the seminar with no one else on the bus to Belfast but the driver, a Polish lady and a copy of Flann O’Brien’s *At-Swim-Two-Birds* curiously discarded on a nearby seat [3].

### Rise and Fall

On the evening of the 11th, the news broadcast an impending economic crash. Inevitable as the rain over Donegal, the great Irish Rising was falling. The government was still resisting raising low tax rates, which had made it a magnet for global technology companies, their presence contributing to spiraling house prices and a highly inflated sense of national wealth based on virtual, intangible resources. Rain lashed the Letterkenny streets whilst in Smithfield, a partially

regenerated district of Dublin, I looked online for traces of a former lighthouse-keeper, naturalist and poet, D. J. O’Sullivan, who retired to his cottage in Shrove on Inishowen Peninsula in Donegal after decades working at the lighthouse on the island of Inisstrahull. He had turned what he witnessed there into naturalist columns for *The Cork Examiner*, writing about giant hawk-moths and other phenomena studied from his lighthouse ‘observatory.’ I realised that to rely on electronic memory was another piece of extreme foolishness, but in the great Google memory I found some poems first published in 1947 and a reminder that O’Sullivan’s son was the last lighthouse-keeper in Ireland [4].

### Landing on Mars

Next day at the Visual Arts Centre in Letterkenny, three children try to climb on top of one of the *Island of Mars* installations, and then push and click. When nothing happens they stare at it as if at something alien. Nearby there’s a pile of peat on the floor of the gallery looking equally displaced, yet curvilinear and regal, its mighty memory deeper than our own. In the corner is a vintage knitting machine. An artist-engineer from Canada worked with a wholly female local knitting circle during her residency in Inishowen and persuaded a local farmer to let them buy sheep’s fleece for €3.5, where he would otherwise be paying €3 to have it taken off his hands. There is no local market for it, though goods made from wool are soaring in price internationally. They say you can’t buy wool for knitting in shops now in Donegal. Sheep fleeces are regularly discarded. The artist and her team find local collaborators to teach them to card and spin. The pre-dyed wool is incredibly beautiful. Pieces of wool-work made from locally sourced sheep combined with scientifically inflected patterns on display in the gallery. They have now formed a co-operative to take the project forward.

Vilem Flusser has written: ‘Until quite recently, one was of the opinion that the history of humankind is the process whereby the hand gradually transforms nature into culture. This opinion, this “belief in progress” now has to be abandoned. The human being is not surrounded by two worlds then, but by three: of nature, of culture and of waste. This waste is becoming more and more interesting’ [5]. In my talk I say it seems important to remember the temporal:

time, both recent and in the deep past, from dolmens to peat to fish stocks. And the production of wool has been a strong feature of several of the projects relating to how human and environment combine and intertwine. ‘Now for the first time in history, the disintegration of civilisation takes place on a world-wide scale: no “island cultures” are left to carry on the old processes, even at a reduced level. Within a generation, mankind will enter an age so dark that that every other dark age will seem, by contrast, one of intense illumination. Even the animal survival of the species may for long hang in balance. The trauma left on the human psyche will be far worse than that from any previous fear or terror, even the melting of the ice-caps’ [6]. I point out that Lewis Mumford, writing this in 1946, was actually commenting on the Cold War, not what we would call Global Warming—a connection which Bruce Sterling 60 years after Mumford has echoed, saying ‘Climate chaos has been stealthily creeping up on us for two centuries. Now she is here in spades and she won’t go anywhere but worse. Global warming is the dirty little sister of nuclear Armageddon and she requires no validation from Time Magazine or PBS specials even though she is getting those tributes too’ [7].

### Tactical Architectures

There are other residencies: self-generated and collaborative initiatives connecting to land, sea and sky in environmentally and socially challenging contexts across the world. Often temporary structures are being dreamt up for forests, polar reaches, living-rooms and islands. Spaces for research in semi-autonomous zones offer opportunities for dwelling, thinking, building, talking, eating, data collection and collective living. In Scotland the Outlandia off-grid treehouse Observatory has recently opened in Glen Nevis, designed by London Fieldworks duo Jo Joelson and Bruce Gilchrist with architect Malcolm Fraser [8]. In Bonete, off the Sao Paulo State coast of Brasil, where oil companies now thrive, software programmers Alexandre and Fernando Freire have built a lab for visiting artists and media researchers, following Christopher Alexander’s Pattern Language guidance as well as permaculture principles [9,10]. Across Rio’s Guanabara Bay and in the surrounding state, a white van housing the EME (Estudio Movel Experimental) integrated residency research initiative takes the notion of the ‘mobile home for artists’ to a new level, connecting chil-

dren in schools bordering the fragile Mata Atlantica Forest with biologists from Rio's Jardim Botânico and Active Ingredient from the UK, whose data sensing project links Brazilian trees with English trees in forests now under a threat from British government privatisation proposals [11].

Living as an artist in Beijing on a long-term open-ended self-generated residency, UK artist Helen Couchman independently negotiated the construction site for the Bird's Nest Stadium in December 2007 before the 2008 Olympics, where she persuaded construction workers to pose for 143 haunting photographic portraits; their anonymous faces look out of her resulting book, capturing a moment of intense reality in a then feverishly rebranding city [12]. Couchman's recent work *Cloud series, Yellow lining* was inspired by a journey above the Beijing skyline: 'The inadvertent starting point for these works was . . . noticing, as the plane in which [I] was travelling descended towards the as yet unrevealed Beijing metropolis, a thin layer of bright yellow cloud, delineating a relatively fine line of material through which the aircraft quickly passed. From the ground nothing of this curious narrow band was visible, only a clear blue sky. There is some irony here in the application of the English expression "every cloud has a silver lining," which suggests that everything bad has its positive, if perhaps at first hidden, aspect. In the present case the matter is reversed, the clear blue of the sky being discreetly penetrated by an invisible layer of tangerine haze. It is difficult to see the "silver lining" in this ominous yellow vision' [13].

In London Manu Luksch and Mukul Patel of *ambienttv.net* develop 'experiments in living,' inviting artists to reside in their home to make work and collaborate on 'tactical fictions' and 'transitory architectures.' Their studio overlooks the changing cityscape of pre-2012 Olympics London.

Inaugural artist and leading Japanese photographer Naoya Hatakeyama claimed, 'A photograph carries a message from nature' [14]. Subsequently in March 2011 his Mother was killed in the Japanese Tsunami. The visiting artists also collaborate on a film with *ambient tv* and a group of young people set in 2030, when 'policy makers and multinationals hold meetings to discuss economic growth and its environmental and social impact, separated from common people by rings of security forces, they

fail to notice that the world around them has already moved on. A new generation has taken social change into their own hands, by repurposing devices, reconfiguring spaces, and rewriting conventions with sustainability in mind' [15].

Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh's line 'to snatch out of time the passionate transitory' might describe residency experiences which enable transcendence through retreat from or transfiguring of the everyday [16]. Others invite activity at points of dynamic flux through research into the flow and tow of environmental changes. These include residencies afloat, which encourage research into changing marine ecologies—such as the pioneering ship *Heraclitus*, which grew out of the 1970s Biosphere experiments [17,18]—and, from the Antarctic to the Amazon, David Buckland's Cape Farewell boat-trips attract artists, scientists and others on expeditions to view disappearing ice and forests [19]. Since 2009, Tapio Makela's catamaran-based M.A.R.I.N. project, a 'seafaring laboratory' has offered residency opportunities, ideal for media cultural nomads, stimulating trans-local and interdisciplinary discourses around the edges of European archipelagos [20].

### New Meshes

Such journeys can provoke collective and collaborative processes. The *Lovely Weather* project also pinpointed the significance of locality, of intensity of relations within place, staying with a wave long enough to feel its breaking. The Donegal programme revealed ways in which societal concerns may mesh with artistic and scientific enquiry. New terms for future co-operation have been developed. Golf-playing rockers, pop stars, artists, fishermen and marine ecologists find themselves figuratively in the same trembling boat. Residencies, like storm-clouds, come and go, as do funding sources such as the Per Cent for Public Art scheme, which supported the Donegal work. But even if these no longer exist, memories of the artworks reside, like traces of rain on sea-walls, with a deepening impact on those who experience the localised effects.

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