World Player

The multinational postgraduate academy. The Rijksakademie is increasingly emerging as a world player with contacts and collaborative partnerships across the entire globe.

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In the past ten years the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten in Amsterdam has worked hard on the internationalisation of its programme. Both participants and mentors have been sought in “non-western” countries. Today, after active recruitment, twenty to thirty per cent of the participants come from Asian, African and Latin American regions. The differences among the artists from “non-western” regions are considerable. While some wrestle with the serious context within which their work at the Rijksakademie is discussed or have difficulty with the permissive nature of the Dutch culture in which politics and art are scarcely connected, for others it is a relief to finally be able to practice their artistic skills without obstacles. Goddy Leye, “In Cameroon I was frustrated with the fact that it took such an unbelievable effort to gather the materials I needed to make my work. I sometimes had to wait three months before I could edit a video and even then I had no guarantee it would actually be my turn. When I applied to the Rijksakademie I knew exactly what to expect. I knew where I was going and I had a sketchbook full of unrealised ideas. The first year I produced an enormous amount of work.”

After two years at the Rijksakademie many non-western artists are confronted with a moral dilemma: returning to their country of origin and finding their way within a less “art-friendly” environment or staying in Europe and concentrating on a personal career. A number of them opt to return, and take the initiative there to create a context for their work. Two years ago the RAIN Artists’ Initiatives network was established for and by these former Rijksakademie participants, originating from the Rijksakademie, coordinated by Gertrude Flentge, and partially supported by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (and Development Cooperation) and the *Prins Claus Fonds*. At the present moment the RAIN network comprises seven artists’ initiatives in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Mali, South Africa, India and Indonesia. The objective is to support these initiatives in the various countries with the expertise of the Rijksakademie so that they eventually develop into independent locations that have broad-based support within the local and regional cultural world. In addition, the RAIN network provides an international platform to exchange experiences and to establish a dialogue by and about the south-south and south-north axes. In this way RAIN also endeavours to counterbalance the prevailing cultural discourse of western countries.

The differences among the initiatives are enormous. While Greg Streak runs the Pulse initiative in Durban (South Africa) on his own, Ruangrupa in Jakarta (Indonesia) is a real artists’ collective. Open Circle in Mumbai (India) has developed into an artists’ initiative with a strong political and social activist

overtones. It organises workshops for artists , theoreticians, sociologists and activists. Centre Soleil d ‘Afrique in Bamako (Mali), an initiative by Hama Goro, is more a centre for contemporary artists from Mali and South Africa with the accent on painting and photography. It is very much aware of the current dialogue about “contemporary African art” in western art theory with the accompanying cynical fact that most African countries are barely actively involved in this dialogue. The Centre Soleil d’Afrique therefore organises workshops with African and International artists to stimulate exchange between local, national and international artistic practices.

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I talk with Pablo Ziccarello in Amsterdam. He has been working for the past two years for Trama, an initiative set up by former Rijksakademie participant, Claudia Fontes, in Buenos Aires. Trama wishes to form a bridge between the different groupings and initiatives within the Argentinian art world. It has deliberately chosen not to open an exhibition area. Trama is not concerned with the production of art objects, but with stimulating the discourse. By organising workshops in which local, regional and international artists and theoreticians participate, and thereby making use of existing Argentinian structures and organisations in the art scene, Trama endeavours to stimulate the debate on contemporary art in relation to Argentine culture. Financially, Trama had become reasonably self-supporting, but after the economic collapse and the riots of 19 December this has become difficult. Ziccarello, “It was as if in the last Trama workshop on the theme ‘art practice and the social scope’ (in which, among others, curator Charles Esche, philosopher Christian Ferrer and Reinaldo Laddaga participated), we predicted the riots of 19 December. The discussions about public space came very close to the events that actually took place in Argentina a few weeks later. This reconfirmed the value of our projects and also gives me the courage to seek out and collect money for the coming projects.”

The latest project to be included in the RAIN network is a project by Goddy Leye in a poor district with some thousand inhabitants, called Bessengue, in the town of Douala in Cameroon. In November 2001 Goddy Leye (originally from Douala, now at the Rijksakademie) and Bill Bidjocka (an artist from Cameroon, residing in Brussels), were asked to coordinate a workshop with 23 artists from various countries. The workshop was a success and Goddy was asked to do a second project. Together with three other artists from the Rijksakademie, James Beckett (South Africa), Hartanto (Indonesia) and Jesus Palomino (Spain), he formulated a number of project proposals that will be run concurrently in Bessengue. Beckett is setting up a local radio station, Hartanto is starting an Internet project whereby the people of Bessengue can come into contact with comparable districts in Bandung (Indonesia), and Palomino is going to examine how his architectural structures stand up in a real shanty town. Goddy Leye will create a remake of the most popular Hollywood film shown at the local video club (frequently pirate copies from India). He will do

this in collaboration with the population of Bessengue, who will also be the actors.
For Goddy this is the kick-off for a larger project in Douala. He has detailed plans for setting up the next RAIN artists' initiative in his native town. His Art Bakery will have a studio programme where artists can work temporarily, with a basic unit for video editing, and he will establish a portfolio programme where young artists can learn to compile an interesting presentation of themselves. Goddy, "There is a small but highly dynamic art scene in Cameroon. I think it's important to keep this alive. And the public for contemporary art is gradually developing. I don't consider the establishment of Bakery Art as an obligation, but I do believe it's a necessity. Moreover, it is also stimulating for my personal development. Otherwise I probably wouldn't be able to manage it. It really takes a great deal of time and energy."

With thanks to Gertrude Flentge, Pablo Ziccarello, Greg Steak and Goddy Leye

Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten
"The Rijksakademie has no programme, there are no standard methods. There is no predominant conception of style and no dominant ideology about art and its social position. In this unique way the Rijksakademie combines the extraordinary qualities of artists' residencies, research centres and postgraduate programmes at a high international level.

The participating artists work in all disciplines: painting, drawing, photography, graphics, sculpture, video, film, audio and computer. The relationship of the visual arts to architecture and public space, theatre, new media, music, dance, literature and film, for example, can also be examined.

The Rijksakademie has four departments: Studios, Workshops, Collections and Prix de Rome. Participating artists have generally completed an art study programme and have a number of years of practical experience. It has been established that a stay at the Rijksakademie at this point in an artist's career has the biggest impact. The average age is currently twenty-nine. Approximately half of the participants come from outside the Netherlands. In 2002 from Argentina (2), Armenia, Belgium (2), China, Cuba, Ecuador, France (3), Great Britain, Ireland, India (4), Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Yugoslavia (2), Cameroon, Croatia, Morocco, Mexico, the Netherlands (approximately half of the participants), Nigeria, Pakistan, Poland, Spain, Turkey, United States (4), Zambia, South Africa (2), Sweden and Switzerland. (www.rijksakademie.nl)