

RESIDENCY PROFILE



Kulttuurikauppila 3am. photo: Cólín Rush

Residential Adventure

CÓILÍN RUSH REPORTS ON HIS RESIDENCY AT KULTTUURIKAUPPIILA, NORTHERN FINLAND



Tikka1000. photo: Cólín Rush



Taidekeskus. photo: Cólín Rush

WHEN applying for residencies, I rarely employ a strategy, instead I approach a target with enough zeal to ensure success. I'm a fan of the Japanese marketing technique of product bombardment. I make as many applications as possible in the hope that one will succeed.

And it was in exactly this way that I came across the Kulttuurikauppila residency in Northern Finland⁽¹⁾. I had googled the phrase "international artists residencies" after running out of suggestions made by VAI e-bulletins. Google yielded results – and I applied to three of the top 20 using arbitrary criteria for elimination. None amongst them had anything to do with my likelihood of success and for this reason I was suspicious when they replied to the affirmative. I was consumed with the thought that they must be a sloppy operation to accept me on the basis of my own application.

My next thought was that they assumed there was something in it for them. Further investigations proved my initial misgivings unfounded. With the exception of the website's colour scheme they seemed very professional. They accepted only three candidates per annum; and of those usually one was a college professor or some similarly respectable type. It says a lot about my application technique that I neglected to check any of this out before applying and I quickly became concerned that they would discover I was an impostor.

The timing of the proposed stay was fortuitous. I was finishing my MA in the middle of June and it was around this time that the Curator, Leena Vuotovesi thought it would be a good idea for me to arrive. It turned out I had to take down my show, move out of my house and board the plane, all on the same day. This workload came with the fallout from too much partying and I struggled throughout the day. By the time I was packing for the plane I was suffering from nervous exhaustion. The plane seemed to have a calming effect on me and I assumed the role of the nonchalant young man, unperturbed by queues and security.

In my haste to pack I had neglected to bring reading material and so in Riga I watched the same beer commercial on a screen for about an hour before boarding the connecting plane. Helsinki proved a far more amusing airport, which at the time was resplendent with 'life size' Moomin characters (who knows what size a Moomin really is?). It wasn't long before it was time to fly onward to Oulu Airport, which turned out to be a rural type of setup with a sparing amount of decoration. Leena awaited me at arrivals and waved through the Perspex as I queued for my bags.

As we drove to the residency Leena informed me of the group involved in creating the Arts Centre. It was an inspiring story of a small group of artists in a rural municipality who lobbied to have a facility built on the site of their studios. The centre now services community groups and attracts a high calibre of exhibitor. Two such candidates, Tapani Kokko and Virpi Kanto were opening that evening and with this in mind I decided to rest before proceedings began.

The residence itself is a modern apartment with kitchen and dining area – all made exceptional by an unending wash of Arctic light. In the computer area a desktop and router supply hi-speed internet and amongst the furniture, a couch and wall sized bookcase provide separation from the bedroom. The bedroom comes with a flat screen TV. Being a self avowed television addict, I moved it to the computer area for fear I would go all 'Howard Hughes'. The studio is a large space with a printing press and a lengthy wall full of tool filled wardrobes.

At this point the bed was occupying my attentions and so it did until I was awoken by a knock telling me the opening was underway. In the courtyard everyone gathered to hear a speech and imbibe in wine while a previous resident, Gerlinde Misenbrooke, gave a reading from *Kaleva*, a Saga-like novel that serves as one of the first examples of written Finnish.

As the night progressed the numbers whittled until it was myself and some other artists enjoying leftovers under the midnight sun. A member of the centre, Sanna Koivisto, has an adjoining property housing a beautiful wood-burning sauna. The women took to the sauna first as the men insisted on having the hotter portion of the episode and so it was when our turn arrived we sojourned to the heat and whipped ourselves with branches culled from surrounding trees. At intervals we ran to the riverbank for submergences taken by public jetty. It was an idyllic scene and only the language barrier tempered its excellence. Amongst the men were Tapani and his two sons who hid my underwear in an effort to amuse me. I communicated my mock displeasure in the usual non-verbal ways.

Tapani is a wood sculptor who cuts figures of schoolboys with unfeasibly large penises. These are strangely serene pieces chopped raw by axe and hatchet. Later that evening he presented me with a beautiful book of his work. The rest of my stay in Finland followed this format – sauna followed by generousities of hosting parties.

An immediate example followed the next day, when Gerlinde took me to Oulu to meet friends she had made during her stay. We had a picnic in one of the parks; and later I was inducted into their Tikka Hall of Fame. This group used a Finnish summer game called Tikka, as an excuse congregate during the brighter months. Their zeal for this outdoor version of darts knew almost no bounds. The enthusiasm seemed steeped in irony – but on closer inspection it appeared simultaneously sincere.

The group had created a backdrop of administration to validate their hobby – which included tournaments, trophies and even a commemorative calendar. I was presented with my own board and 10 darts by Annti Matta and Sirpa Dahlstrom, with whom I spent the rest of the weekend.

I installed the Tikka board in my studio. Although Tikka is an outdoor sport, my studio was big enough to facilitate it. I imagined I would train to become good enough to figure in the Tikka fixtures, which would stretch across the summer. But this did not occur in the way I imagined. I remain one of the most unnatural Tikka players the world has ever seen. My fascination with the game did endure though – and with the board as a constant reminder I devoted much of my waking life to the contemplation of Tikka's mysteries. The bulk of video work I made in Finland is entirely given over to Tikka and I even embarked on a journey to Sweden to spread the word about the sport!

Artists Residencies cannot be qualified by the calibre of their facilities alone. And Kulttuurikauppila is not to be found wanting in this regard – but it is also important to recognise that a residential stay is facilitated by the curator or manager in charge. In my case I was chaperoned by Leena, a young woman of my own age. I was often away on various excursions, but when I was to be found at my residence, Leena would seek out my company for a coffee. For the Finns, all occasions call for coffee and far from being an inconvenience, this was something I looked forward to and sought out in the absence of its request.

The exhibition I had in the Oulu Museum of Art was not the result of my own application. It was facilitated by Leena's relationship with this institution. It was this relationship, which influenced the manner in which I was treated while exhibiting – which was very well.

Interestingly, while I wouldn't say I was alienated by the level of professionalism I encountered when working with this institution – I had only previously witnessed this as something being lavished on other artists who's work I was being employed to install. It was nice to be on the receiving end of the museum apparatus for a change!

At the opening many speeches were given over to talk of this being the first collaboration between the museum and the residency. And the hope is that there might be further collusions. For most artists a show of this kind is a worthy addition to the CV – and for those lucky enough to be invited, any suggestion of it should be forcefully pursued.

My stay was enjoyable and when I think of it I remember it as a kind of adventure. At every point, idea's for work were either indulged or encouraged – and this included an awful lot that I haven't had time to account for. This brief report barely covers the outcomes of the first two days of my residency – and in the end I stayed for four months. I can thoroughly recommend this residency to any artist who is seeking to broaden the realm of their experience.

Cólín Rush

Notes

(1) My participation in the Kulttuurikauppila residency was supported by the Arts Council of Ireland and details regarding Kulttuurikauppila's application procedure can be found at www.kulttuurikauppila.fi.