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Residency for artists on hiatus: Interview with Shinobu Akimoto and Matthew Evans (a.k.a. smfoundation)

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Residency for Artists on Hiatus: Interview with Shinobu Akimoto and Matthew Evans (a.k.a. smfoundation)

by Amish Morrell

Residency for Artists on Hiatus (RFAOH) is a collaborative artwork by Shinobu Akimoto and Matthew Evans in which participants are invited to suspend their art practice and to produce non-art for the duration of the residency. Operating as both a virtual and functioning residency, RFAOH consists of a formal organizational structure that includes two Directors (Akimoto and Evans) and an advisory board, with an application process whereby artists who have produced a pre-existing body of work propose a non-art activity they would complete during the residency. (By the time this issue is published, RFAOH will have selected participating on-hiatus residents.) Conducting these activities anywhere they like, residents will document and share these activities via the RFAOH website, and are required to submit a final report upon the completion of the residency. As Directors/Coordinators of RFAOH, Akimoto and Evans will support participants by seeking funding and an institutional host for the residency’s website, promoting the residency at art events, designing objects with the RFAOH logo, and producing an annual report in the form of a catalogue documenting its activities. This June, Akimoto and Evans were in Venice promoting the residency during the opening days of the Biennale. C Magazine caught up with them later over email, conducting this interview while they were in Montreal.

AMISH MORRELL (AM) How did the idea for RFAOH come about?
SM FOUNDATION (SMF) Probably several things but mainly triggered by our own personal experiences.

MATT When I moved to Japan around 2003, I kind of cut my relationship to the Canadian art community—I found it increasingly difficult to stay engaged; or rather, I became less and less interested in travelling, studying another language, broadening my community, and so on. I was never really good at “being on the scene” in the first place but this physical distance made it more difficult to keep up the fortitude. It begs this question about all the other unmentioned aspects that “being an artist” entails—the social obligations or cultivating necessary people skills, keeping this identity going, which demands some kind of outside validation, and so on. Since returning to Canada, I have been looking to re-integrate into art in a way that provides more authentic opportunities to work with other people. In this sense, I am most excited about the collaborative aspect of this project beyond the two of us, and really, I aim to somehow re-imagine this period away as something worth mining creatively.

SHINOBU While “making art” in the past, I always felt blown away or defeated by other people’s creations—amazing designs or earnest but wacky ideas—and the only way to compete with them as a creator was to make more out of it by placing it in this peculiar art context, which I knew how to do. At the time, there were enough sources of inspiration. Then I kind of ran out of them, and maybe ran out of energy as well. I wished I wasn’t making art in this particular way. While it’s true that we may be addressing some larger questions about institutions and artist’s identity issue in this project, I honestly think that it came about as a pure reflection upon my own state or phase as an artist. It was also as an attempt to explore a new way of engaging in artmaking—to design the website and products, administrate, curate, and so on, and yet still seek to be conceptually critical and inspiring, without completely retiring and becoming a designer or something else. In the meantime, aches and pains as it may sound, I do have a slight hope that this project could also act as a kind of catalyst for people who relate with what we are talking about to maybe feel more at ease about it, or find some inspiration and get back on track, or quit completely to find a much better occupation. And they can get at least a $30 stipend a month.

AM There is a somewhat absurd way RFAOH frames one’s non-art activities in relation to one’s artistic ambitions and career, by having a residency where the artist is invited to not make art. Despite being about not making art, it has many of the institutional trappings of an art organization, where applicants submit proposals and documentation of their
activities, and are listed on your website as participants. By this logic, they could be hosted by an institution, as you propose, and included in the system as part of an exhibition. Through these institutional trappings that you’ve created, it seems that the project proposes an examination of what constitutes artistic practice and how it’s shaped by larger economic and institutional contexts that produce art, and also reveals how they separate it from life.

You’ve been promoting art projects at places like the Venice Biennale, where thousands of people from across the art world have gathered, and are also seeking institutional support or an institutional host for the project. Why do responses mean you’ve been getting? And what kinds of issues do these responses raise in relation to ideas you’re trying to explore?

SMF: Well, we had started proposing the project way before we created the website this spring to international institutions like the Baltic Centre, Witte de With, the New Museum, and the KW Institute for Contemporary Art, whose educational or public programmes we felt were more innovative. And why not? It’s not like we were looking for exhibition space. By “host,” we just wanted them to provide a link, a banner ad for example, to the art project on their website, and possibly some financial support. We have received only one official rejection—from Baltic Centre. They have no time to bother with proposals from nobody like us, we all know. We also failed to secure funding from granting agencies four times, but we kind of expected this. Who’d give public money to artists trying to make art about artists not making art?

So we just put an ad on effux. It cost us 800€, which is a lot of money for a one-time email posting. But, at the same time, effux claims to have 80,000 arts professionals subscribers from all over the world, so we felt compelled since we really want to participate in this domain and reach certain people, and have an international pool of applicants. So we asked them: “You know, we’re just artists. Our project is an artwork and not a normal residency, so we actually aren’t seeking any institutional support. We’re not looking for this kind of support. Are we not?”

SMF: Once we ran the effux ad, we were inundated with applications and inquiries from people from all over the world, who hadn’t actually visited our website or read our criteria but were keen to come to Montreal and work on their artwork, because of the international residency circuit or be legitimized by our “fake” residency institution. It’s been fascinating.

At this point, we have more of these “missunderstood” applications, and initially we were like, “man, people just don’t read.” But still, lots of these artists’ first language isn’t English. And after going to Venice and experiencing this epiphanic moment of international art and politics, we started thinking: “gosh, maybe the art world is desperate for the opportunity to take their work abroad.” It makes us conscious of our own struggles and reconfirms that the questions we are asking are artistic and catered to a specific crowd of people. People saying that, of course, we would love co-conspirators worldwide, who’d chink in with what we are really talking about and are compelled to participate in, regardless of if our best interests or not.

AM: It’s interesting to hear how effux read your ad, given some of the more experimental projects, such as Time-Bank, that it’s associated with. But I suspect they didn’t take Home Notes (Time-Bank currency) as payment for postings. Based on the applications that you have received, how do artists conceive the notion of being and what does it figure into their proposals? Do they propose to simply run an advertisement or do they also work at a different job for the duration of the residency, or do they abandon their usual way of working?

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AM: Are you playing co the home team while negotiating something using the money one made through art? Which art projects mean you, and the other, agreeing with Jake Chapman? That as soon as art becomes a badge of social membership its potential for critical action is eroded. You say that artists might not be looking for a hiatus if they had institutional recognition. Is participation in an event an admission of defeat?

SMF: To us, this is the question—we do worry that such a perception or stigma could prove very interesting “on-hiatus” artists from applying. We also wonder whether we would have come up with this project if we ourselves had been as “successful” as some of our peers. Once again, it is a question of “defeat” according to whom? We’ve received inquiries about whether teaching art at a post-secondary art institution may be considered a hiatus. If one considers that art is about making opportunities to explore art or whins or to live a certain lifestyle, helping others to critically make art is a valid way to engage with it, isn’t it? It’s also a different kind of institutional recognition. What about doing “non-art” or un-related things using the money one made through art? All these questions have to be answered by the candidates themselves. This project attempts to unfold an institutional endorsement of production that the artists themselves have declared is not art, which may defy this “defeat.” We think this poses curious questions, perhaps about how we allow our own “institutions” to impose expectations (and criteria) upon us, or how offering an endorsement (conceptually and financially) for not making art may compare to the endorsement one might earn while making art. We guess we’ll see when the residency.

The website for Residency For Artists On Hiatus is: http://residencyforartistsonhiatus.org

Amish Morris is Editor of C Magazine.

Endnote