

“FOGO ISLAND DIALOGUES: BELONGING TO A PLACE”

BORDER CROSSINGS

Fogo Island Dialogues: Belonging to a Place

by Erika Balsom

The construction of the Fogo Island Inn, completed in June 2013, has been exceedingly well publicized in major media outlets ranging from *Monocle* to the *The Wall Street Journal* are confronted: Zita Cobb, the millionaire who returned home to revitalize her remote village; Todd Saunders, the Newfoundland-born, Norway-based architect who blended vernacular and modern vocabularies in the construction of the inn and four artists' studios; the rooms, which average around \$1000 a night, featuring textiles made by local women; the international artists' residency programme; the narrative of economic devastation and hoped-for regeneration; the icebergs, the rocks, the whales. By now, the same information has reappeared again and again, creating the kind of promotional monologue necessary to propel an initiative of this magnitude and ambition into popular consciousness. And yet, it is a somewhat frozen discourse that ultimately fails to fully reveal what is at stake in Fogo's contemporary transformations.

Last July, under the auspices of Fogo Island Arts—the wing of Cobb's Shorefast Foundation that manages the residency programme and its exhibition space—the inn hosted a gathering with the goal of doing precisely that. Organized by the strategic director of Fogo Island Arts, Nicolaus Schafhausen, along with curator Amira Gad and artist Gareth Long, this first iteration of the Fogo Island Dialogues took as its theme “Belonging to a Place.” The symposium assembled participants from across Europe and North America with the intention of creating a think-tank-like situation

in which issues both practical and conceptual would be discussed. With topics ranging from “The Insular” to “Oedipal Drift” and “The Commodification of the Authentic” (full disclosure: I was one of two presenters on this last panel and one of the few Newfoundlanders among the invited speakers), the Dialogues' stated aim was to initiate an interdisciplinary conversation on preservation and renewal,



1. Fogo Island, summer, Newfoundland, 2013, photograph: Steffen Jagenburg.
Photographs courtesy Fogo Island Arts.

2. Zita Cobb, 2013, photograph: Steffen Jagenburg.

3. Inside the Tower Studio, 2013, photograph: Guy L'Heureux.

4. Squish Studio, Fogo Island, 2013, photograph: Steffen Jagenburg.



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taking the “idea of an island as a metaphor for any rural locale.”

In Friday afternoon’s keynote address, art historian Tom McDonough picked up on the notion of island-as-metaphor and deftly unfolded the shifting place of islands in the cultural imaginary—from Thomas More’s utopia to Michel Foucault’s “carceral archipelago,” tax havens and beyond. Titling his presentation “Extraterritorial,” McDonough emphasized that islands are marked by a double character: they are sites of both isolation and exchange. As he said, “Island logic has been the logic of purity, but islands have always been hybrid spaces.” Fogo is no exception. Despite its tight-knit communities and remote location, its history is one of transnational trade in a primary material—cod. But the fishery has collapsed and Fogo finds itself inducted into new networks of exchange—those of art and tourism, but not just. When one symposium participant asked why there were so many shiny new trucks on the island, the answer proved how imbricated the island is in the pathways of global circulation: these were often either the product of enormous debt or the spoils of working on the tar sands in northern Alberta, something many rural Newfoundlanders do for months at a time before returning home.

Despite such evidence of participation in the complex trajectories of goods and people in the early 21st century, McDonough’s proposition of the island as a site of exchange was sometimes forgotten in the days that followed. Instead, the romance of isolation took hold. Questions of migration, hybridity and heterogeneity were too often left behind in favour of essentializing Fogo

Island—and, indeed, the province of Newfoundland—as a pure and untouched terrain whose inhabitants are superlatively friendly and hospitable. In this, elements of the mainstream media discourse were reinforced precisely where they might have been troubled. Some spoke of the island in idealized terms or as a trip back in time, thus depriving it of its complexity and its hard-won contemporaneity. The relative

absence of Newfoundland voices at the Dialogues was undoubtedly a contributing factor to this mythologizing tendency and endowed the title of “Belonging to a Place” with a particular irony.

There were, however, contributions that directly addressed the problem of what curator Dieter Roelstraete called, in his presentation, “the romantic attachment to an illusory authenticity.” Cobb, present throughout the Dialogues, assiduously avoided the term “authenticity” when speaking of her initiative, rightly preferring the much less fraught “specificity” and “uniqueness.” Even the centrality of contemporary art to Cobb’s vision draws her project away from the simple musealization of a village it might have been. The incorporation of vanguard cultural production—art, architecture, design or food—bespeaks her conviction that Newfoundland is a place where tradition survives and transforms according to the exigencies of a globalized present. Architect Fabrizio Gallanti further destabilized the rhetoric of purity when he pointed out that any recourse to a supposedly “authentic” Newfoundland identity based on the culture of European settlers is but an artificial construction of origins that overlooks earlier inhabitants such as the Beothuk people, whose genocide served as an enabling condition for the establishment of the culture that remains dominant today.

In her welcoming remarks on Friday, Cobb elaborated her understanding of Shorefast as a “not-just-for-profit corporation,” one that would optimize well-being for community rather than for financial yield. After breaking even on operating costs, all revenue from the inn will go to a charitable foundation that will use the money for initiatives to benefit the community—although precisely how decisions regarding the allocation of funds would be made remained unspecified. In what would become a much-debated phrase throughout the weekend, Cobb said, “Business got us into this, business should get us out of it.” The idea was that it was business’s tendency to privilege revenue over, say, sustainability that had led to the depletion of the fish stocks that devastated Fogo’s economy; but business—conceived as entrepreneurial spirit and marketing expertise—now offered the possibility of revitalizing the island and offering its inhabitants the choice to remain. Of course, as many symposium participants noted, the “business” in the first part of Cobb’s sentence and the “business” in its second part are far from the same. “Business” here becomes a catch-all that encompasses wildly divergent practices and stretches the word so far that it loses semantic integrity. As curator Monika Szewczyk pointed out, this idea also prevents thinking about how socio-economic models that lie outside of the capitalist imaginary—such as the notion of the commons—could function as a way of conceptualizing what is happening, or could happen, on the island.

If “business should get us out of it,” what is the role of art? Is it just a subsidiary of business? Or is it, as Cobb suggested, a specific way of knowing, akin to that of the Fogo Islanders? Throughout the Dialogues, discussion often returned to the question of what kinds of relationships can be said to exist among visiting artists and the two primary populations on the island: tourists and residents. Jerry Ropson, an artist-in-residence during the Dialogues, spoke of tourists inviting themselves in to his studio or peering in through the windows. The studios are, after all, one of the main architectural attractions on the island; it is hardly surprising that a tourist would be interested in seeing a real artist at work in such a location. The artists, meanwhile, are there to concentrate on their practice, not to be gawked at. This scenario draws attention to the unarticulated relationship that exists between the broader activities of Shorefast and those of the residency programme. The one clear link between the two exists in the form of the gallery on the first floor of the inn. (On view during the Dialogues was its inaugural exhibition “Let the other thing in” by Kate Newby, a New Zealander who completed a residency on Fogo from October 2012 to March 2013.) But the existence of the gallery does not solve the problem of what kind of interaction, or lack thereof, should occur between artists and tourists, nor what kind of labour the residency programme performs in the promotion of Fogo Island as a luxury tourism destination, or in the fulfillment of visitors’ expectations after arriving. To what extent is the residency programme autonomous and to what extent is it to be instrumentalized? While these issues were raised repeatedly throughout the course of the weekend, there was no consensus reached, save for the acknowledgement that answers will be forthcoming only in the future.

Lars Müller’s presentation drew on his experience producing the book *Insular Insight: Where Art and Architecture Conspire with Nature* (Lars Müller, 2011), which details the Benesse Art Site on the islands of Naoshima, Teshima and Inujima in Japan’s Seto Inland Sea. Naoshima provided a point of comparison and contrast with Fogo: both have made use of iconic architecture and art production to transform remote islands into international destinations, but Naoshima privileges site-specific installations and possesses its own museum, whereas Fogo does not. Müller also made use of his presentation to point out that though the mandate of the Dialogues was to assemble an interdisciplinary group, the vast majority of the invited participants were artists and curators. He suggested that both the residency programme and subsequent iterations of the Dialogues—to be held at the Museum für angewandte Kunst in Vienna before culminating in a final event on Fogo in Summer 2014—might seek to involve individuals more



Tower Studio, Shoal
Bay, Fogo Island, 2013,
photograph: Steffen
Jagenburg.

broadly defined as “thinkers” so as to break outside of the vocabularies, protocols and concerns of the art world.

Scheduled to occur in November 2013, the Vienna Dialogues will take as their theme “Culture as Destination.” It is a topic without the same immediate relevance to Fogo Island as “Belonging to a Place”—to start, there are no art museums on the island and the event will take place some five thousand kilometers away. It thus runs the risk of exacerbating a tension already existing during the July Dialogues: the imperative to adequately mediate between the particular and the general, between the specific context of Fogo Island and more abstract reflections on the questions of remoteness, art publics, tourism and island logic that the initiative raises. Throughout the weekend, architect Todd Saunders often intervened in question-and-answer periods by requesting that speakers make concrete connections to Fogo when they had not done so in their prior remarks. It became clear that a spectrum of attitudes existed

amongst the attendees, ranging from those who assumed the Fogo Island Dialogues would consist entirely of conversations about Fogo Island to those who conceived of the event as a series of talks that simply happened to be taking place there. In this sense, the Dialogues reproduced a key issue confronting the residency programme that was much discussed throughout the weekend: should artists-in-residence make work that explicitly engages with the island or does Fogo simply provide space and time to work on projects that may have no particular relationship to it? Schafhausen insisted on the latter, while others suggested that spending time on Fogo would serve no purpose if the work could have been completed elsewhere.

Though a significant amount of the weekend’s discussion orbited around the question of what relationship artists in residence on the island were to have to its native inhabitants, community participation in the Dialogues was negligible, with the weekend’s audience consisting almost entirely of the invited participants and the artists-in-residence. Mary MacDonald and April White of Eastern Edge Gallery, an artist-run centre in St. John’s, made the trip, but the event was not advertised sufficiently ahead of time to allow a greater number of people to make travel plans. With a complete schedule appearing only a day in advance, the Dialogues were open to outsiders in theory though not in practice. As such, form mirrored content and the event took on an island-like insularity. This might be understood as a symptom of a much larger question facing Fogo Island Arts: who constitutes the public of this organization? Is its true goal, as artist Piero Golia suggested during the final panel, the production of images to be circulated through the media channels of art, architecture and high-end tourism? (Documentation of the Dialogues was extensive enough to provoke more than one participant to joke that there were more cameras in the room than people.) Or is its primary concern an engagement with local populations? What is the relationship between Fogo Island Arts and the existing artistic communities of Newfoundland? Is there a way of successfully mediating between these various demands?

Three fascinating, if not at times frustrating, days proved to be far from enough time to establish clear consensus or to generate satisfactory solutions to many of the questions and problems raised throughout the weekend—but this was expressly not the goal of the event. Rather, the aim was to provoke discussion that will continue on and off the island, both at the upcoming Dialogues and beyond them. In this, the conversations of “Belonging to a Place” were a resounding success. ■

“Fogo Island Dialogues: Belonging to a Place,” took place at the Fogo Island Inn, Newfoundland, from July 19 to 21, 2013.

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