

# Artists' Mobility Lab

## working with visiting visual artists

May 9 – 10 2011, Newcastle & Gateshead

The first **Artists' Mobility Lab** was organised in May 2011 in North East England by **ISIS Arts** in collaboration with **Turning Point North East**. It addressed visual arts organisations, networks, festivals, galleries and practitioners committed to international cultural exchange who develop projects, residencies and exhibitions with international artists. With a programme of speakers from England, Wales, Switzerland and Austria/Slovenia, the event focused on the mobility of visual artists into the UK, particularly in the context of projects initiated by smaller artist-led organisations.

The mobility lab acted as a **catalyst for learning and debate** on artist mobility and identified specific issues for the visual arts. Over two days, participants met at two key North-East visual arts venues – **BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art** and **Globe Gallery** – and networked over a dinner and studio visit hosted by artists at **New Bridge Studios** in central Newcastle. A **primer on artists' mobility** was published. Participants gained an overview of the context for **mobility of visual artists**, shared professional experience and discussed advocacy actions to improve artist mobility.

### RECOMMENDATIONS from the Artists' Mobility Lab:

1. The points-based visa system, introduced to manage migration to the United Kingdom, is inappropriate for short-term professional visits by artists. The Artists' Mobility Lab calls on the Government to exempt artists from the current restrictive and damaging system and to introduce a better route for artists on short-term visits to the UK. It supports the Manifesto Club's Visiting Artist campaign<sup>1</sup>, the open letter to the Home Secretary published in *The Telegraph*<sup>2</sup> from 120 artists, authors and cultural leaders and work by English PEN<sup>3</sup> and others on this issue.
2. Priority should be given to ensuring greater reciprocity for artists' exchange, so that artists can both travel abroad for professional purposes and be hosted in the UK, through the provision of appropriate systems and resources.
3. Support for artist mobility is required on several levels. Better information provision is needed, including strengthening the capacity of organisations that advise on mobility, and support for innovative artist-led pilot projects to demonstrate and inspire through 'just do it' socially networked approaches. Examples of artists mobility projects presented at the Artists' Mobility Lab: Wales Arts International's Practics mobility information service and the H.O.M.E. artist-led project. There is a need to increase sharing of mobility information, advice, contacts and networking across the sector, through online platforms, networks, publications and blogs.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.manifestoclub.com/node/777>

<sup>2</sup> 27.06.11: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/letters/8599757/Points-based-visa-system-places-unnecessary-burden-on-artists-making-short-visits-to-Britain.html> and follow up article: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/8599638/World-class-artists-put-off-coming-to-Britain-by-intrusive-points-based-immigration-system.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.englishpen.org/aboutenglishpen/campaigns/visasforoneuartistsandacademics/>

4. Artists and visual arts organisations should speak up about mobility problems and tell their mobility stories. These should be publicised online and through visual arts publications. Artists and visual arts organisations are urged to support the Manifesto Club's Visiting Artist Campaign, sign the petition, send testimonies, mobilise supporters and raise awareness on the issue through collaboration with other organisations and sectors.
5. There is a need for better UK representation on international artists' networks and bodies. Debate and advocacy actions within such networks should be widely shared with practitioners, networks and other visual arts organisations in the UK.
6. The forthcoming Arts Council England's international policy (due to be published following the research phase in 2010) should reflect the need and desire for an open and supportive environment for artists' mobility into the UK, in recognition of the value of hosting international artists.

### **KEY FINDINGS from the Artists' Mobility Lab:**

1. There is a strong commitment to international engagement in the visual arts, particularly from smaller artist-led organisations. It is essential that migration administration systems do not hinder policy and practice in international cultural exchange.
2. The UK points-based immigration system, which authorises visits by working artists from outside the EU, poses significant challenges to smaller visual arts organisations, due to a lack of administrative and/or financial capacity to register as sponsors. The points based system is becoming very expensive with the cost being passed on to arts organisations that are facing their own cuts and this is becoming a further disincentive to international collaboration.
3. The experience of artists and arts organisations trying to obtain visas through the points-based system is extremely inconsistent in terms of responses from UK embassies around the world. The added responsibilities for small organisations in dealing with this patchy and unpredictable service are onerous.
4. Traditional funding streams for bringing art work and artists to the UK are getting smaller and fewer. There is a tendency to turn towards export, with the cultural sector expected to follow the economic model of "exporting our way out of the recession". This poses a real danger in creating very uneven flows of artists out, with little opportunity to bring artists in.
5. There is a growing body of creative responses from visual and performing artists on the issue of closed borders and mobility problems. Greater visibility of such projects and artworks would help bring public attention to the issue.
6. Examples of collaboration between visual arts organisations and the HE sector on international issues demonstrate how this can support artists' mobility though existing academic networks and infrastructure across Europe and beyond.
7. The UK visual arts sector can learn from models of engagement abroad (e.g. examples from Switzerland and other European networks) in order to develop a stronger voice for the visual arts in Europe on cross-border mobility issues.
8. The Artists' Mobility Lab demonstrated the level of interest among artists and visual arts organisations in this subject. It offers scope for visual arts networks and organisations to develop a national event to reach a wider audience.

The **Artists' Mobility Lab Working Group** is taking forward these Recommendations and Key Findings and developing a series of actions through their networks and organisations.

***Artists' Mobility Lab Working Group***

Gillian Nicol: a-n [a-n The Artists Information Company](http://www.a-n.co.uk/) <http://www.a-n.co.uk/>

Clymene Christoforou & Sharon Bailey: [ISIS Arts](http://www.isisarts.org.uk) <http://www.isisarts.org.uk>

Manick Govinda: [Manifesto Club](http://www.manifestoclub.com/node/777) <http://www.manifestoclub.com/node/777>

Julia Bell: [Turning Point Network](http://turningpointnetwork.squarespace.com/) <http://turningpointnetwork.squarespace.com/>

Hilary Gresty: [VAGA Visual Arts and Galleries Association](http://www.vaga.co.uk/) <http://www.vaga.co.uk/>

Adam Knights: [Visiting Arts](http://www.visitingarts.org.uk/) <http://www.visitingarts.org.uk/>

Judith Staines: [Judith Staines](http://culture360.org/author/jstaines/) <http://culture360.org/author/jstaines/>