

**Demystified.** The European Ceramic Work Center as Centre of Excellence. By Nick Renshaw. Jap Sam Books [Website:<https://www.japsambooks.nl/products/demystified>], Heijningen 2017. 300 s. Ill. litt. hf. 33 €.

In the book *Demystified* Nick Renshaw examines the European Ceramic Workcentre (EKWC), the well known ceramic work centre in the Netherlands. As an internationally orientated ceramics facility, the EKWC has achieved a reputation as one of the places in the world for artists to go and work as artist-in-residence. I have been fortunate enough to have worked there on more than one occasion myself and so have read this book with great interest.

Through his observations in the book Renshaw attempts to decipher the various reasons why the EKWC has achieved such a high international reputation as ceramic focused artist-in-residence centre. It is the author's ambition to outline what lessons can be drawn from the EKWC model so that a potential exists for it to be introduced to both existing as well as new organisations of similar nature around the world.

There are many fine and active ceramics centres around the world. These include Guldagergaard in Skælskør, Denmark; the International Ceramics Studio in Kecskemét, Hungary; the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts in Montana, the United States; the Pottery Workshop in Jingdezhen, China; and the Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park in Japan, to name but a few. All of these centres are in their own way unique, basing their existence on the peculiar cultural and financial situations in which they exist. After reading Renshaw's study however, I can certainly see aspects where the EKWC is radically different from all other ceramic centres.

One example which demonstrates the EKWC's unique and alternative working structure relates to the diversity of participants' intercultural and interdisciplinary backgrounds - a dynamic which provides great inspiration for all artists-in-residence. Those artists who can be regarded as pure ceramic specialists, in fact, make up only about a quarter of the total number of participants. The remaining three quarters are a mix of painters, sculptors, musicians, writers, dancers, architects, textile artists, and so forth, something which I experienced myself during my own time as artist-in-residence there.

A further radical aspect of the EKWC as artist-in-residence centre concerns its activity as knowledge centre. Its employees possess special ceramic and pedagogical expertise which allows all artists, no matter what their background or understanding of ceramics, to be in a position to make full use of the knowledge and facilities of the centre. This implies that the individual participant, regardless of background, is able to customise a personal, experimental work-period within a ceramic frame of reference and so create new forms of expression in the contemporary context.

For artists, the centre acts as a place where one can both produce new works of art as well as participate with others in a collective learning process - building personal networks

along the way. In addition it has been important for the centre itself to expand and maintain newly established knowledge and experience, unearthed each time participants conduct new projects and innovative research during a period in-residence. This new found knowledge is subsequently distributed widely, most commonly in the form of exhibitions and publications.

The EKWC has an open management structure with a consciously interdisciplinary strategy for creating a wide and expanding network of national and international collaborations with educational institutions, museums, galleries and producers. This helps to attract funding from bodies within both the public sector as well as those from the private sector. Currently, and regrettably, there exists a continuing threat across Europe with regard to the removal of previously guaranteed public funding within the cultural field. This has also been the case for the EKWC, and because of this the centre was forced in 2015 to move from its original base in the Netherlands in 's-Hertogenbosch to its current location in Oisterwijk. The move, however, has in fact provided positive results for the EKWC in that its workshop facilities are now housed in a much larger and more optimal old factory building. Additionally, new collaborations with the local community have emerged - including the starting of a visitor centre for the general public as well as new collaborations with prospective sponsors.

The author emphasises that long-term investments are crucial for the success of any aspiring ceramic centre or associated artist-in-residence organisation. It is no longer enough just to offer a couple of large kilns and a bed for free. It is necessary to invest in up-to-date facilities that allow for competent research and the development of ceramics as a formal language and material; and in good and suitable working and living conditions for the participants. In addition, it is necessary for centres to increasingly engage with the public, wider business communities and higher education institutions.

Based on my own experiences of inspiring and productive periods of work at the centre, I can only agree with Nick Renshaw in defining the EKWC as 'Centre of Excellence'. A place where you can learn deeply.

The book can be recommended, both if you want insight into 'demystifying' the challenges faced by contemporary ceramic centres, as well as to understanding the prospects for ceramic work centres in the future.

Contents: The book contains a description of the EKWC's 40 year development and historical background. This is done through; an analysis of the centre's success (Chapter One), through interviews with both former and current directors as well as workshop managers during the previous 40 years (Chapter Two), through the EKWC's relationship and influence on other organisations - such as the Northern Clay Center in the US (Chapter Three), and an analysis of TransArtists in Amsterdam (Chapter Four). In addition, the book contains photo material from the workshops in 's-Hertogenbosch and Oisterwijk.

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