

# Gasworks: 25 years of residencies and cultural exchanges

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Gasworks is a non-profit art organization established in 1994 that works both in the UK and internationally. It provides studios for emerging London-based artists and residencies for international artists at their first exhibition in the UK, supporting them and giving them the opportunity to spend time researching and developing ideas, in an exciting panorama that a city like London can offer. *Combat Art Review* meets the director **Alessio Antonioli**.



Gasworks' director Alessio Antonioli

## **1. This year is Gasworks 25th anniversary. Could you give us an overview of what Gasworks is in 2019 and what's been achieved since 1994?**

A lot has been achieved in relation to the fact that we are now in a secure space, we were able to buy the building not too long ago, which gives us a much clearer sense of the future. Over the last 25 years we have worked with over 500 artists from 80 countries around the World. This is an amazing track record, not only for the number of artists, but also for the breath of Gasworks and its ability to go out of the main European and North American art centers, to really trying to support and promote talents on a more global scale. The focus of Gasworks is on artists, not just the art. We work with the actual people that make art, that's why since the beginning we retained studios, we have been running residencies, we continue to work with artists towards the production of the exhibition. So it really is about the makers. Gasworks established its identity as a space for artists but it is also a space for curatorial processes and ideas, albeit aiming to reflect the direction that emerging artists are taking. The format of the program has changed very little over the years, but its content is constantly being updated by artists. Of course, this does not happen in isolation. Gasworks evolution happens in response to artists but also its context

of peer organisations and the art 'ecosystem' in London, the UK etc. Gasworks was established here in South London because it was in a fairly central but completely underdeveloped part of the city, so the building was cheap and affordable to us and therefore to artists who are renting our studios. Things, however have changed and one of our neighbour is the American Embassy. We were lucky to be able to buy our building 4 years ago as it has established our roots and secured our future in a landscape that is constantly changing and becoming more and more unaffordable. I have been here for 21 out of Gasworks' 25 years, so, professionally-speaking we have 'grown up together' and lots has changed over this time. As the world and as the politics around the world are changing, as this wave of populism and nationalism takes hold, I find that working internationally, working across borders and across cultures, has paradoxically become more radical now than it was 15 years ago. I think this is very sad reflection of the state of things now. But for people like myself and many others who believe in cultural exchange and in international dialogue, the current situation only confirms and renews our commitment and determination to this work.

## **2. How many artists do you host in a year and how do you develop programmes?**

We have 13 studios, 4 of them are reserved for 4 groups of international artists coming from 3 months, so we do 16 residencies over one year. The other 9 studios are rented to London based artists for a period of five years. On top of that we organize four exhibitions, mostly solo shows. Very rarely residencies are linked to the exhibitions as residencies are more focussed on research and development while exhibitions are commissioned-based. The open ended nature of residencies is important to me, particularly if the artist is new to London. In this case, having an exhibition at the end of the residency would create a lot of pressure and would limit the experimentation and the exploration of London as a site for new ideas and research. In addition to residencies and exhibitions, we work with two other artists each year on a six months residency where artists developed work in conjunction with community groups in our neighbourhood.

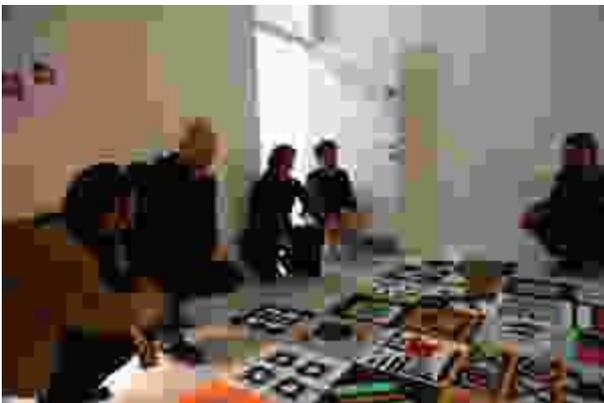


### **3. What are the new needs of artists?**

it is very important to safeguard spaces for dialogues and experimentation in a context like London, where life is very expensive and the art market is big necessity. Residencies and subsidised studios are vital to support artists' creative development, particularly at early stages of their careers, when they may not have the support of commercial galleries. This is a very critical time in artists' careers and they need a space that is willing to take a risk, that is able to invest on their potential. I'd like to think that Gasworks is one of the spaces.

### **4. At this particular moment in history it is fundamental to continue to support collaborations, cultural exchange and dialogues. How's the residencies system changed in your years at Gasworks and what is changing now?**

In the last 20 years the art ecosystem has become a lot more sophisticated. Collectors, philanthropists and the wider public are seeing smaller and more experimental places as an opportunity to find new artists, ideas and approaches. The market for art has also expanded and become more global. This has also made art more accessible to more people. It would have been unthinkable 5-10 years ago to have a group of collectors to supporting a residency at Gasworks, where the investment is in the artists' development rather than a piece of work. We are very lucky now to have significant support by private individuals, who are enabling us to invite artists from countries or region where the funding structure is extremely limited or non-existent. It has become a joint effort between Gasworks and many visionary individuals to provide residencies for artists who can potentially become part of a more international conversation through their work and the exposure to new ideas and opportunities.



### **5. Who are the supporters in 2019?**

Our main funder is the Art Council of England, then there are trusts and foundations in the UK and internationally that support us. We also have an expanding group of collectors, philanthropists and people that have a passion for art and artists. Collectors are becoming more adventurous, they are not only going for established artists, they are more willing to take risks. They are also aware that buying work by more emerging artists is a way of supporting their career and become part of their journey.

### **6. *Triangle Network* is an international artist and visual arts network of organizations that provides support and development and Gasworks is part of this global system of connections. What's *Triangle Network's* plan in 2019?**

*Triangle Network* is actually the network that gave life to Gasworks. It started in 1982 and developed as an international network of partners before Gasworks existed. While, over the years, Gasworks has become the main hub and I have become the director of the Network, most of our partners are based in Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is also important to say that while I do manage the development of the network, each partner is completely independent. We come together because of similar methodologies and a shared commitment to creating exchanges. For years the network relied on donations from foundations and NGOs, but this support is diminishing fast. It is perhaps time for *Triangle Network* to look at how it can build its own sustainable model, one that is less reliant on sporadic donations. We are trying to establish a fund that supports the network, starting for partners operating in places where resources are more limited. Reduction in funding is threatening the future of many of our partners, often leaving nothing in its place. In addition, this situation is threatening the dialogue that has been established over the years, returning to a hugely problematic one-sided flow of ideas and information. With this in mind, finding a level of self-sustaining system for the networks and for its partners is fundamental. To do so we try join forces and thinking. At the moment we are working on a possible exchange program amongst our partners in South Africa, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, which we are hoping to extent to other areas of the network soon.



## **7. Could you talk a bit about the current exhibition by Libita Clayton at Gasworks?**

We work with a foundation called *Freelands Foundation*, who is supporting us to create links with artists and organisations based outside London. This programme addresses the disconnection between London and the rest of the UK and aims to create a better flow of ideas and opportunities. Libita Clayton was the artist invited as part of this programme which included a residency and later down the line, an exhibition at Gasworks. We were able to facilitate her to undertake research in London and Cornwall, as well as South Africa and Namibia as she traced her family roots and journey. Specifically she researched her father's exile from Namibia to Europe, ending up in Cornwall working in the mining industry. In her work she looks at the role of mining as key to a process of colonial extraction, not only on its effect on people, but also as geological trade. The show takes the form of a sonic archive, informed by a series of photograms that chart her research and served as music score for a composition she created with fellow artists, musician and sound engineers. In this way, the archive is accessed in a more experiential way, through the emotions, sensations and feelings it triggers on the viewer.