

# project network

by Heidi McKenzie

Building a network is crucial to both creative and economic success as an artist. The Guldagergaard International Ceramic Research Center has found a unique way to facilitate this process.



Project Network, Christian Brun, who was onsite to run a wood/soda firing of his own work. I gleaned more history from Brun who explained to me that the old farmhouse had been converted into artist accommodations, with a kitchen, dining area, and library, as well as staff offices. He explained that the old apple-storage barn was converted into a state-of-the-art ceramics center, complete with sixteen open-concept artist work spaces, 3-D ceramic printing resources, multiple image transferring facilities, expanded plaster and casting rooms, as well as a conference/meeting center.

## The Premise

Guldagergaard runs two Project Network sessions per year, one in November/December and one in January/February. The participating networkers are recommended by their schools, nominated as the rising stars of tomorrow. The intent is to build a sustainable international network of ceramic artists of the same generation. A criteria for selection is that you should have graduated from a professional ceramics educational institution within the past two years. In my program this translated into a broad range, from artists who had just completed a bachelor's degree, to those who had completed their second Master of Fine Arts degree, to those who were Ph.D. candidates. Focus areas in the group ranged from design, curatorial practice, craft and/or plastic arts. Our network group brought together participants representing ten countries, speaking twelve languages, who spanned three continents.

Past Project Network sessions have extrapolated their time at Guldagergaard in a variety of innovative ways: touring bite-sized iterations of their work to each of the participants' respective countries; forming creative collectives and spawning new exhibitions and works; touring the Project Network exhibition both nationally and internationally; and building online platforms for both internal and external dialog and promotion. Our group organized a project where everyone created an object that could be packed in a 12-inch cube. We are shipping the whole show to each of the twelve participants' home countries, where each artist takes their turn as curator, exhibition designer, and host.

Initiated in 2001, the program originally focused on participants from schools in England, the Americas, Norway, and Denmark. By 2008, there was a major push to expand the program worldwide, and the current director, Mette Blum has furthered that goal. Schools are reaching out to Guldagergaard from far and wide. The day I interviewed Blum, a school from South Korea had just called, unsolicited, to enquire about sending a delegate. One of the most profound insights Blum shared with me was the fact that most people who come are young (although my program tallied two and a half generations), focused, and ambitious. They are there to work on their

Nestled amidst the small seaside community of Skælshør about an hour and a half from Copenhagen on the west coast of the island of Zealand in Denmark is the thriving arts hub, Guldagergaard International Ceramics Research Center (ICRC). The center is built on the modest acreage of a 1915 tulip and fruit farm. Its name, Guldagergaard (pronounced gool-aya-goh), translates as Golden Acre Farm. The farmhouse itself was a private home until 1989. The city's town council bought the property and gifted it to the Clay Today collective, a group of five, strong-willed ceramic artists who believed that the status and reputation of ceramics as an art form needed to be elevated and promoted, both internationally and within Denmark. Their strategy was to found a dedicated center for ceramic experimentation and exploration in Scandinavia. The ICRC was established in 1997. Since that time it has been operating as an international artist residency, growing its reputation and drawing a high caliber of artists from all corners of the globe.

I was recently one of eleven participants in the fall 2014 session of Project Network. During our stay I met one of the founders of



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1 The farm house that accommodates up to twelve resident artists at the Guldagergaard International Ceramics Research Center (ICRC). 2 Project Networkers Trine Lyngsholm and Kaupo Holmberg at Ole Jensen's studio in Copenhagen. 3 Egle Paksyte, wood-kiln technician with resident Livia Baldanza and Project Networker Kanami Takeda unloading the wood kiln at the ICRC. 4 The Project Network 11 pictured post exhibition opening in the Guldagergaard studio. Left to right: Karin Blomgren (Sweden/Norway), Yulia Tsukerman (Israel/Russia), Katie McCormack (US), Kanami Takeda (Japan/Denmark), Mingaile Mikelenaitė (Lithuania), Kaupo Holmberg (Estonia), Trine Lyngsholm (Denmark), Heidi McKenzie (Canada), Hannah Rose Whittle (UK), Eszter Imre (Hungary/Sweden), Brydee Gillbard (UK). Photo: Courtesy of Yulia Tsukerman.

own projects and to realize the proposals they had submitted to the three-person international selection committee (the program's board of advisors). However Blum, speaking from ten years of experience at the ICRC, says that the participants' initial intent and focus is too narrow. The Project Network sessions are not solely about any individual's work or their creative process, "the most important thing is about meeting and getting to know other artists from all over the world, and learning that it's the international network that is going to take you to the next level in your career."

## The Experience

Our group worked together under two roofs—the studio and the farm house, and the culmination of our time together resulted not only in a group exhibition that showcased the most recent innovations of 11 artists at the beginning of their careers, but also the beginning of lasting relationships, both professional and personal.

The final exhibition came together not in theme, but through process. Each of us set out to challenge ourselves to explore something new—an aspect of making we had never tried; a new technique; a different clay body; different types of firings; even completely new ways of expressing our vision and ideas, from functional to conceptual, allowing ourselves to be influenced by our physical surroundings. There's nothing like negotiating your way through three 30-hour wood firings and a gas firing to gel a disparate group of strangers. I would be remiss if I didn't mention the unparalleled commitment of the small yet dedicated staff on campus who were there for each of us 100%, but always careful to push us to learn through our own experiences.

I was struck both by the preponderance of conceptual artists and the alchemy of ideas taking shape in and outside of the studio. Bike rides to the seaside as well as "dancing it out" at the local watering hole—complete with disco balls and near life-sized carved statues of a cowboy and a Native American were as integral as the plethora of guest lectures and presentations, excursions, and studio tours. Two of our guests were former Project Networkers who had established

themselves on the local scene: Darien Johnson, an American now living in Copenhagen, challenged us to create on the periphery and Christina Schou Christensen gave us a virtual tour of her studio and talked about her rise to relative clay stardom. We later visited her collective studio, Viktoria Ceramic Studio Cph, where we got a sense of the local professional scene first hand.

One of my personal highlights was a studio visit with Bente Skjøttgaard and Ole Jensen. The superstar designers gradually opened up their lives to us, and what was planned as a half-hour stop became a three-hour show-and-tell that left most of us spell-bound. We were fortunate to have both formal and informal visits by the Danish living legend, Nina Hole, who graced the grounds with one of her spectacularly collaborative onsite castle installations this past May. Yet another major highlight was the unexpectedly life-changing, 45-minute, one-on-one mentorship with multidisciplinary site-specific artist, Richard Launder. Launder, who is currently teaching at Bergen National Academy of the Arts, has been mentoring Project Network participants for twelve years. He has garnered a reputation for getting inside each artist's practice and turning it on its ear—but in an alarmingly productive way.

The group, as individuals and as a collective, was far from insular. We celebrated US Thanksgiving in style, inviting over 30 friends and supporters of Guldagergaard into our world; a few of us forged friendships with local artists or villagers. In the end, Blum was right: the program started with eleven strangers from four corners of the world who, after a brief yet intense period of productivity, have formed both professional and personal bonds that, if the past is a testament to the future, will last a lifetime.

*To learn more about the Guldagergaard International Ceramic Research Center and Project Network, visit <http://ceramic.dk/project-network>.*

**the author** Heidi McKenzie is an ceramic artist, critic, and curator living in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. She attended Project Network in the fall of 2014. To see more of her work, visit <http://heidimckenzie.ca>.