



## There is no such thing as an unpolitical artist Edgar Leciejewski in Conversation with Nicolaus Schafhausen

Nicolaus Schafhausen

You applied for the Fogo Island Arts residency through one of our open calls. I was surprised at first when I saw your name on the list—I wouldn't have thought the remoteness of Fogo Island would interest you. What did you know about it? And why did you apply?

Edgar Leciejewski

The open call came with a picture, which caught my attention. From that point on I started to inform myself about Fogo Island. As I had always been a city-dweller, I thought this might be an interesting experience.

NS

After having spent six months on Fogo Island in 2015, during which you developed new works for a solo exhibition at the Fogo Island Gallery, how would you describe your experiences there? What effect did the island have upon you and did it meet your expectations?

EL

My expectations changed over time—in the lead-up, during, and after. Prior to arriving I was only aware of pictures and films of the island. I did some research into its history and landscape, and about the residency program with its striking studio architecture. Otherwise I didn't know what to expect or what awaited me there. As I said before, I had never lived in a non-urban environment before, or spent more than a week outside a city. During the period I was actually on Fogo Island, it impressed and surprised me. Not merely the island, but also the culture. I began to appreciate Canada and its political structures to such an extent that I decided to extend my residency, ultimately staying for six months. The most fascinating thing for me was living in an environment devoid of shops, cinemas, theatres, libraries—being left entirely to one's own devices, with only nature to commune with. That was extraordinary. I noticed then how people had installed themselves there over the past few hundred years.

In retrospect, I would say that I have calmed down somewhat, I am more relaxed and to a certain extent more balanced as a result of the experience of living in such a remote rural place and not being in direct daily contact with others in an urban milieu.

NS

Did you feel integrated into everyday life on the island? Did the local community respond to you in an interested way and did you make friends or encounter disapproval of any sort?

EL

Yes, I was able to make friends with many of the locals. In such a remote area, one is always viewed as a foreigner, an outsider. Perhaps being in foreign parts allows one to open one's heart more readily. I didn't really experience any disapproval as such—more curiosity, and perhaps a certain naivety. During my first two weeks on the island it felt like being on the road in the GDR [German Democratic Republic] or Czechoslovakia in November 1989. It reminded me of things I had experienced in the Eastern Bloc or in Cuba.

NS

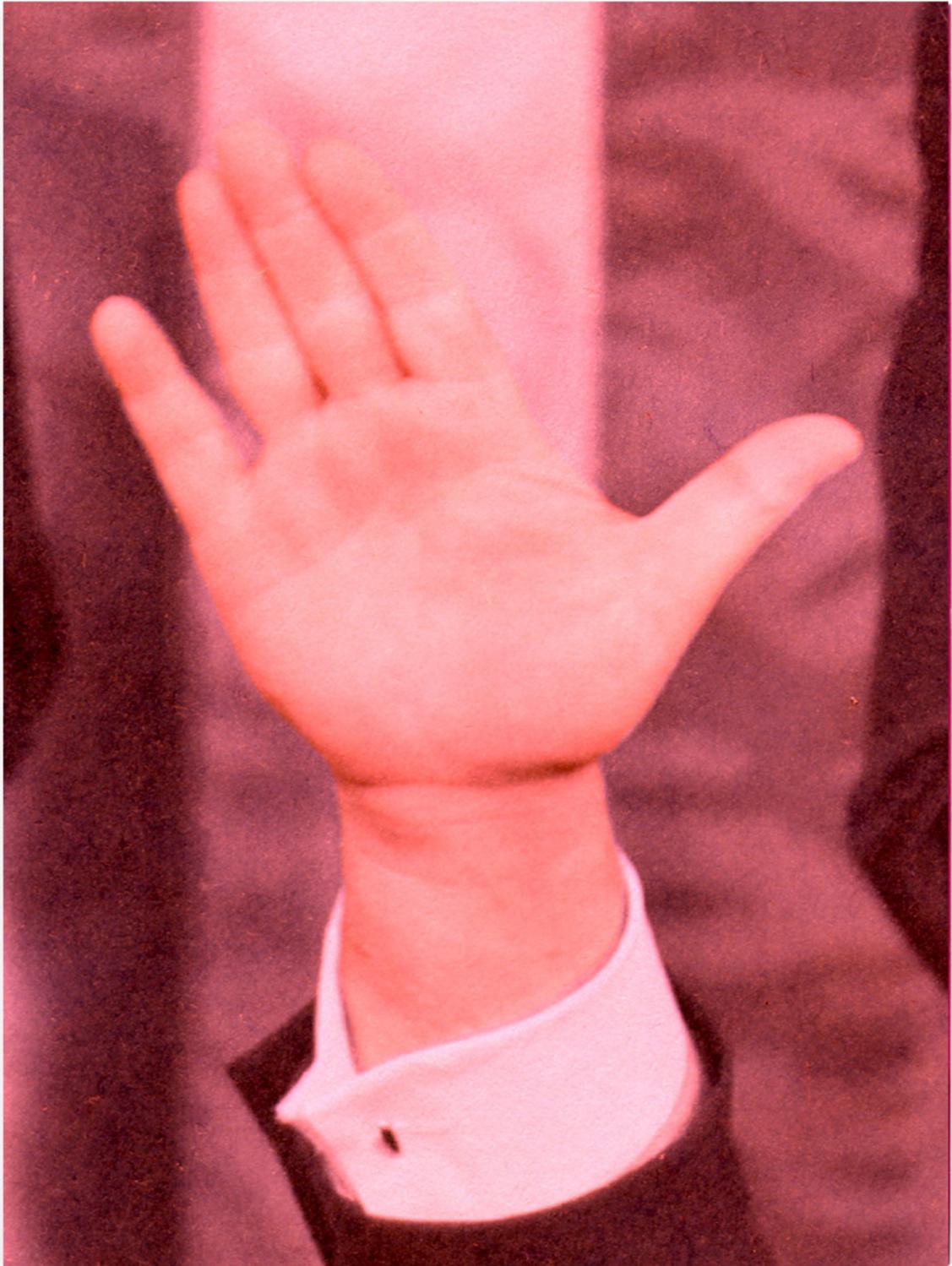
Can you be more specific about these experiences?

EL

On the island, you might take some homemade cheesecake around to the women living in the neighbourhood in the afternoon, and then the same evening their husbands would knock on the door one after another to bring you fish. Or the ways in which they express their curiosity, which I found to be extremely endearing.

NS

Whenever I spend time in Canada, particularly in Newfoundland, I'm almost overwhelmed and touched by the friendliness of the people and the search for closeness and intimacy. Would you attribute the openness of Canadians to their extremely positive view of the world?



Hand # 01, 2016

Color Print on AluDibond, Museum Glass, Wood,  
55,6 cm x 43,6 cm x 5 cm

EL

Yes, absolutely. Canadians don't think of themselves in terms of them being a nation cast from one mould, but as more of a cosmopolitan nation, citizens of the world. They hail from everywhere and are particularly interested in other cultures and countries.

NS

You once spoke of Fogo Island's "poetic structures." Can you define this more precisely? Do you mean that the area or the island holds a specific poetic power for you?

EL

When I say that I feel a landscape, yes, then I have a strong subjective relationship to it and project something poetic into it. It speaks to me and reminds me to a great extent, particularly in the north of Fogo Island, of old fairy tales from Europe. You are making your way through the forest and you are convinced there's a witch lurking behind every birch tree.

Before I arrived on Fogo Island, I felt that I was unable to capture or depict landscape with the camera. Failure was my companion. However, on Fogo it was simply there. One sees the landscape as if one's eyelids had been cut off.

NS

The majority of households on Fogo Island have only had Internet access for about 15 years. I bring this up because the digitalization of life has had an incredible effect upon the island and has de-isolated the populace to a certain extent. But on the other hand, having access to the Internet means residents of the island have been able to leap from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century in a very short space of time. Information can be retrieved more quickly and in much greater quantities. Particularly for those people who have only ever lived and worked on the island, it is still a great novelty. Did you notice these changes? How do people live there?

EL

If I had been in this situation 15 years ago, at my age, with my level of experience, and had been given a chance to spend time on Fogo Island—albeit without the Internet and everything that goes with it nowadays, then I would certainly not have stayed as long. Or I would've brought a container full of books with me and got hold of information by other means. It is difficult for me to say whether the residents or their mindsets have changed because of their living situation and the effect of technical advancement. I think that modern communication structures and the ways in which one can inform oneself (via the Internet) hold the possibility for a participation in life in different places, which many on the island have not necessarily grappled with. For the inhabitants, it is more to do with an influence from the outside. Other people come from outside with these means of communication and the inhabitants themselves grow at a slower rate into this situation than city-dwellers do, for example. However, viewed from a different angle, they don't need the Internet in the way it is used in the city. They are perhaps much more leisurely in their approach, but as a result they seem all the more engaging and agreeable.



Hand # 07, 2016

Color Print on AluDibond, Museum Glass, Wood,  
55,6 cm x 43,6 cm x 5 cm

NS

Were you able to foster any relationships with people on Fogo Island?

EL

Yes, of course; it's hard not to over a period of six months. What struck me as an extremely positive feature was the fact that Canada has an excellent education system. There is a high level of education on the island despite the fact that it is so rural. This was really nice to see and experience. I think that I would have met with disapproval more in an area where the level of education was lower.

NS

Did the society there strike you as homogenous? In contrast to many other Canadian provinces, the population is almost exclusively white. Indigenous peoples, for example, are non-existent.

EL: Well, yes. Mainly the Irish and the English were the first to settle there and still make up much of the populace. In this region, i.e. the northeast of Newfoundland, the last Indigenous inhabitants, the Beothuk, were killed or driven out in the early nineteenth century. In the conversations I had with 14- to 16-year-olds in the island, I had the impression that they understood it as their own Shoah. I think young people are taught this history in school and they develop a feeling for it, a sense of empathy. If you go for a walk at Sandy Cove Beach, near Tilting, you'll see a sign stating, basically, "A white man was slain here." Of course, it reflects the attitude and viewpoint of the immigrants at the time, the fact that First Nations inhabitants had been accused of killing a white man and a posse of white settlers set out to avenge this.<sup>1</sup> For over 150 years now there haven't been any Indigenous peoples on the island, however, due to the school curriculum, a different awareness and empathy for this situation has arisen here.

NS

In the exhibitions we have realized on Fogo Island up to now, every artist has reacted to local features, the specific Fogo context so to speak. In your case it was the works *Horizon 1 (Fettgerüst)* (2014), *Rough Form* (2014) and *Rockets* (2014-15). Do you normally respond directly to your environment and your experience of it?

EL

Yes, I think photographs are about traces of the real. My experiences flow directly into my work. I explore my immediate environment through the medium. I was surprised that my work was not only inspired by nature, the earth and the sky, but also the rubbish that people leave behind. I thought actually that I would be working directly with people on Fogo Island and, for example, respond to their physical presence in some way. When I was applying for the residency I was working on a series of portraits about artists from my generation. I thought I would continue this work in some shape or form on the island. But this didn't happen.

NS

The washed-up detritus in *Rockets*—is it a symbol of civilization for you?



Hand # 03, 2016

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55,6 cm x 43,6 cm x 5 cm

EL: Yes, absolutely. My house was close to the sea and when I arrived in winter there was a lot of pack ice. After the pack ice had melted, there was a wonderful beach in front made up of glass and rubbish. The reason for this is that for the last 150 years there has been a house on this spot. And the people who lived there used the sea as a rubbish dump. Over time, the sea has worn down and polished the shards of glass. To this day it is possible to find corners of the island where people still dump their rubbish. There are even whole engines rusting away.

NS  
Why is Ludwig Wittgenstein a reference for you? It seems quite old-fashioned to me.

EL  
Well, I like his analysis of language and the way he plays with language. It places everything in a relationship with everything else and doesn't take itself too seriously. This opens up our thinking and I like that. I am really interested in Wittgenstein; his philosophy is like doing math problems to keep your mind on its toes, so to speak.

NS  
Are there any other references? Other artists?

EL  
Wolfgang Tillmans or August Sander. Whenever I look at Tillmans' works I am extremely taken by the series he produces. For example, Concorde Grid (1997), or the book Soldiers: The Nineties (1999)—their form and expressive power, but also the way in which Tillmans puts an exhibition together using different elements. He manages to tell us about the state of the world, about his thoughts on what is happening with a degree of ease and lightness of touch—very impressive.

NS  
But that is precisely what you don't do, isn't it? I would say you have, in essence, a more abstract approach, more with an eye on the present, what's happening behind the scenes. Are your works to be understood as portraits—either of people or landscape?

EL  
The works in Rough Form function as portraits and not as landscape photographs as such. The work Horizon 1 (Fettgerüst) in this exhibition functions more like a landscape photograph. It is an abstract motif. And when you are standing in front of it, the way you perceive it is also abstract. After the first few days on Fogo Island, the sunsets started to bother me, the way everyone went for his or her camera and each sunset was more beautiful than the last. I was afraid that my kitsch-filter would overload after a few months. Not because the situation was kitschy per se, more people's sensibilities. As if you had to turn a natural event into an emotional gesture. And then over the course of time I realized that I had to work with the sunset. My impression that the people on the island have a kind of love affair with the sunset manifests itself in the number of portraits of sunsets on Facebook.



Hand # 02, 2016

Color Print on AluDibond, Museum Glass, Wood,  
55,6 cm x 43,6 cm x 5 cm

NS

How important are these formal solutions that you come up with artistically? Is material production actually important for you?

EL

I have thought about this often over the past few months. I've tried to find a job that earns me a living. You can't stop being an artist, there's no question about it. But how do you fund yourself and what do you produce? Are there ideas that can generate money, or do you produce a performance or a thought and how does it articulate itself? Is a picture something that is framed, painted on the wall or simply a sentence articulated into the air, into space? It would be nice if I could make a living from my work. But I also asked myself the question of how I might sensibly use my time productively. Working for an NGO or a foundation perhaps. Or does it make more sense to be in the studio?

NS

In his essay, Bill Arning describes another of your works in the exhibition, *A Scene in a Library* (2013-15) as a self-portrait.

EL

These are books that have accompanied me, that preoccupy me and as a result have become an elemental aspect of my work. In this sense, you can interpret the work as a self-portrait, but this wasn't my intention. It's more about a tableau, which depicts a scene on a shelf and is concerned superficially with the history of photography. In this sense, these references give it more the status of a still life. I am a bookseller and books accompany me inasmuch as I often think about works in book form at first. For example, my thinking for the work *Rough Form*, or similarly *Horizon 1* (Fettgerüst), was in book form before it became an image on the wall. In the case of *A Scene in a Library*, I wanted to resolve the situation differently. I wanted to put the book into the picture. This was a result of my activities in the studio when I observe my own work and images emerge in the manner of trompe-l'oeils—still lifes that speak about myself and my work. The disappearance of the book as a medium and its enhancement were important to me. The investment in beautiful, expensive books and the digitalization of the medium. I wanted to tell some kind of story about this. It was important for me to show the work *A Scene in a Library* on Fogo Island because the book as a medium is a perfect vehicle for knowledge. During my stay there I learned that in years gone by many of the inhabitants were illiterate and that books were often looked down upon. Some inhabitants told me that their parents had often forbidden them to read books because they were considered to be dangerous.

NS

Do you see parallel forms of existence? For example, on the one hand in your studio where you work and think and on the other, in life, in the public sphere?

EL

As far as I am concerned, the studio is the place where the experience of life/society can be processed. This is a place to withdraw to where I can reflect and reformulate my thoughts experimentally. The studio constitutes my parallel universe, but at the same time it is connected to the outside world.

NS

Where do your interests lie socio-politically?

EL

Standing up for the idea of freedom, to disseminate that idea and to fight for it. This is an idea that I have learned and one that I consider to be normal for an understanding of the meaning of democracy, at least one form of it. To stand up for social issues which at present I can see disappearing on the periphery of society. For example, in February 2016 I held a political photography workshop with educators and unaccompanied minors who had fled their homelands to come to Germany, or when I talk to students about their own work and their understanding of the world—in such situations I would like to stand for a particular attitude. Here in Leipzig, in Saxony, I get the impression that people become radicalized more quickly than they do in other parts of Germany—with regard to the debate surrounding refugees. What's happening here is absurd—to experience that. You simply can't look away, you have to stand up for what you believe in and to me that means communicating, talking.

NS

Does that mean to you that your works will have to become more political or that you ought to situate yourself more precisely?

EL

I am working on it. I used to get asked a lot whether I was a political artist, or whether I regard myself as one. As I see it, you simply can't be unpolitical. You can't buy a T-shirt nowadays without making a political statement. There is no such thing as an unpolitical artist. At least if you want to see your work represented in society and make political decisions as to how and where your work will be exhibited and communicated. Being clearer in this regard is also important for me.

Text originally published in: *Edgar Leciejewski, Tones*, Fogo Island Arts, Fogo Island, and Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2017.



9 Hands, 2016

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