



## *I'm new here*

Anton Benois and Beth Dillon, Firstdraft Gallery, July 2015, Sydney, AU

Exhibition text - Alison Groves

Navigating Bhaba's third space, *I'm new here* toys with the condition of a temporary resident: both 'at home', and certainly not. Developed as part of a two-month residency at Listhus Artspace in northern Iceland, Anton Benois and Beth Dillon's collaborative practice considers the tourist gaze, research aspects, and modes of site documentation in international artist residencies, and the complexities of critically engaging with picturesque landscapes in well-chartered territory.

Centred on the northern edge of Iceland, Ólafsfjörður is a proudly stagnant fishing village on the island's crown. With 800 residents, the 12 annual Listhus artists comprise 1.5% of the winter population, generating considerably more artwork per capita than probably an average herring-centric town. With only a few hours of weak twilight a day, the tourist and research experiences of visitors are complicated by darkness and cold, and much of the time is passed indoors. When glimpsed, the scenery is picturesque. Benois and Dillon's investigation is channelled in the absurd narrative of an artificial houseplant, asserting its agency on the landscape as an introduced species on a sight seeing schedule. Our host, the synthetic Dieffenbachia, tours the sublimely empty Ólafsfjörður and Bárðardalur districts of northern Iceland in a protracted, deadpan game of peekaboo. Like a sassy showgirl, its leaves are peeled back in a mock seduction, revealing the pale blue light and heavy blanket of snow, a landscape anonymously northern, and very cold. The snow smooths the landforms like dense marzipan icing, forming a deep diorama of blue-tinted pillows, punctuated by mountains and edging on the Greenland Sea.

The residency houses a rotating cast of twelve international artists, the only permanent resident among them is an artificial Dieffenbachia houseplant: crusted with its lint and resiliently green and pert – perfectly immune to the climate. As the only-faux organic placeholder on the premises, the plant's synthetic greenness and representation of an introduced species beckoned its use in the landscape study, referencing the Post-Internet art trope of the potted plant, or sad fern, as human prosthesis. Uprooted from its quarters, the plant assumes an unsettled independence, and coupled with the film's muffled canned laughter and clapping, an awkward, lip curling creepiness. Botanically, the Dieffenbachia species are a common choice of houseplant for their tolerance of low light conditions, but have a natural resistance to the domestic setting: toxic when consumed by small children and pets. The plant's artificiality, fake-foreignness, and suppressed dangers build the discord in the awkwardness of the deadpan comedy. The plant's gestures in the landscape mark the absurd attempts to connect with a space sublime and foreign, yet within reach. The exhibition re-domesticates the plant and residency research in a minimalist, furnished nook, reminiscent of the artists' temporary, and unusually involved, home making. The deep-etched plant patterns the curtains emblematically; framing the glowing tv screen into a room itself, and the blue-scale photograph-of-a-photograph. The aerial view of Ólafsfjörður features the bank manager's disembodied pointing hand, addressing a feature of the landscape photographed some years ago. This 'official' image of Ólafsfjörður is in every household of the town and reappears in the exhibition, circulating the questions of representation and authenticity in documentation deeper into themselves. Also displayed in the loungey interior, twee souvenirs reference habits of collecting trophies of travels, reducing a sight seeing experience to a dust-collecting object. The recursive forms pry at the edges of the art residency practice as a liminal third space,

mapping complicated modes of engagement in a crisp and weird domestic presentation.

*I'm new here* aptly introduces itself with a self-referential, marking the focus of self, site, and process within the residency context. The artist-abroad has witnessed history and new geography in the wildly diverse roles as colonial documenter, ethnographer, war artist, and postcolonial critic. The artist in residence inherits this legacy of critiquing the other, and pairs it with the equally loaded tourist gaze, and added complexities of a globalised economy and the Internet age. As a staple of creative practice, particularly for early career artists, the international residency model rises in esteem and popularity, and opens some new dialogues on the old questions of construction of value, aura of place. The model makes space for the singularly insightful gaze of the international artist in residence: privileged with a vague mission and equipped with a unique creative, cognitive sensitivity, well beyond that of an artificial houseplant. It anticipates (or contracts) organic cultural capital: artistic outcomes partly generated by the site feed back into it, enriching the place well after the resident returns home. Far from the lensviewed, SD-card exhausting tourist gaze, the imagined artist in residence supplements an experience of place with field notes and refined musings. *I'm new here* draws out these questions with an antidote to the Contiki tourist's gaze. Against the distancing of the absurd, traces of the conceptually reflective process describe a real experience and an actual place with the charm of a hand-delivered postcard.

**Alison Groves, July 2015**