

AKIHIRO OKAYAMA

Global Warming

Acclimating to another country's academic or professional culture

BY ALEXANDER GELFAND

Settling into a new job or degree program can be tough. It can be even harder for those working or studying abroad in places where academic and workplace norms are decidedly different from the ones back home.



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Most colleges and universities offer programs to assist their international students. SVA's International Student Office hosts a number of events throughout the year to ease homesickness and encourage students to learn about their classmates' cultures and traditions.

in London, for his master's degree, then to SVA on a Fulbright—he had to adapt to a more structured academic environment, one that emphasized classroom attendance and project deadlines, while simultaneously adapting to a foreign culture's professional etiquette. The fact that he now teaches in the College's BFA Fine Arts program indicates that he succeeded, but the process is ongoing. "The idea of having a business card still causes a bit of conflict for me," he says. Back home in Spain, most artists eschew business cards because of their association with corporate culture.

Globalization and technology have done much to make the world a smaller place. But Di Hu, an intercultural trainer and coach who came to the U.S. from her native China 14 years ago, contends that the most visible aspects of a culture, like its music and food, represent only the tip of the iceberg. The rest consists of unspoken assumptions, values and beliefs that can be much harder to grasp.

When Catherine Young (MFA 2012 Interaction Design) first arrived in New York City from Manila, Philippines, to study science, she was shocked to see students addressing faculty by their first names and unprepared for the degree of freedom thrust upon her. "I had no one to answer to but myself," she says, "and so many possibilities opened up to

me that I began to question myself." She soon decamped to Barcelona, Spain, to study the intersection of art and science, then later returned to New York, to attend SVA on a Fulbright scholarship. Similarly, when Raul Valverde (MFA 2011 Photography, Video and Related Media) left his hometown of Madrid, Spain, to study and work abroad—first



Artist Catherine Young's science-based practice has taken her to conferences, residencies and fellowships all over the world, including USAID's 2016 Climate-Resilient International Development Exchange in Bangkok. Young portrait by Rache Go. Photos courtesy the artist.

Hu notes that many East Asians, for example, value being polite, formal and respectful to their educators and employers—an attitude that can appear submissive in many American classrooms and creative workplaces, where students and employees are often encouraged to ask lots of challenging questions. This observation is shared by Kaori Uchisaka, director of SVA's International Student Office (ISO). Even when factoring in the hurdle of conversing in a non-native tongue, Uchisaka says, international students can “find it

very difficult to function and be successful in a classroom where speaking up is an integral part of the experience.”

When it comes to career development, Americans tend to prioritize flexibility and individual choice. “The system is less rigid, and there's more opportunity for exploration,” Hu says. In practice, that means focusing less on preparing for a specific career track and more on acquiring a set of broadly applicable skills.

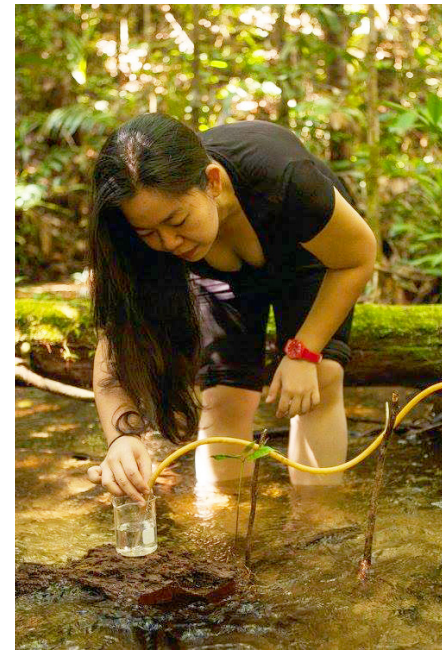
These differences can lead to misunderstandings, confusion and frustration. But there are ways of easing the process

of cultural adjustment.

At SVA, where 44 percent of undergraduates and 54 percent of graduate students hail from 63 countries, that process begins even before orientation, with an online video course in which administrators and faculty emphasize the importance of classroom participation. The ISO also offers workshops that assist international students with everything from interpreting a syllabus to opening a bank account and securing a work visa. And it provides online training in intercultural competency to help faculty and staff better understand and support international students. Many colleges and universities, both in the U.S. and abroad, provide similar resources, and those planning to further their education in another country would do well to research potential host institutions' offerings.

Much of the onus, however, falls on the individual. Attitude is important.

Young, who is currently completing a residency in Vienna, Austria, and has previously worked in South Korea and Brazil, advises artists looking to work



outside of their home country to be flexible and goal-directed. Dropping into a foreign environment can be overwhelming, but it's easier to assimilate if you concentrate on your work and aren't too picky about your accommodations or surroundings. She also emphasizes the importance of taking care of oneself both physically and mentally: Watch your diet, find time to exercise and fight loneliness or homesickness by staying in touch with family and friends.

Hu, meanwhile, recommends researching beforehand the major cultural differences you can expect to encounter in your destination country, and accepting the fact that you'll likely experience ups and downs while negotiating your

new environment. Developing cultural competence, she says, is a process "that can last weeks, months or even years."

In the end, though, it's worth the effort.

Valverde says that his international experiences have been essential to his growth and development as an artist, allowing him to view the world through different eyes and question everything from the artistic canon to his own personal ideologies.

And Young treasures the opportunity her foreign residencies have given her to forge connections with local artists and community members. "The best thing about being an artist is being able to mingle with all kinds of people," she says. "It's good for your work and good

for your mental health."

At the same time, workplaces and schools benefit from the varied perspectives that international students and staff carry with them.

"It makes us who we are," Uchisaka says. "It adds so much cultural diversity and enriches everybody's experience." *

ALEXANDER GELFAND has written for *The Economist*, *The New York Times* and *Wired*, among other publications.