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The Social Life of Artist Residencies: working with people and places not your own - part 2

Dr Marnie Badham, RMIT University, August 2017

The 'social turn' in artist residencies

While some artists migrated to rural locations through retreats and colonies, others thrived in cities enjoying a bohemian life. Following Lind's 'collaborative turn', artists have organised around both instrumentalised public systems and private markets by forming collectives finding new ways to work together, domestically and politically. Colonies differ crucially from these urban bohemias in how Richard Kostelanetz terms "hospitable to counter-bourgeois living," and that "indicatively, political radicals, often prominent in bohemias, were scarce in artist colonies." [26] Around this same time in mid-century America, the term 'artist in residence' was used to mark a building in New York City. This new work-live

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studio model came after a series of onerous bureaucratic processes allowing artists to officially occupy non-residential sites.

The 'social turn' has infiltrated all components of the art world including residencies: artists now collaborate with communities; institutional hosts of residencies are interested in engagement; and international diplomacy opportunities offer increased networks as outcomes.

- Residencies can position artists in community

Across time, artists have been celebrated for creative grassroots and radical ways of working to intervene in broader society. While artists were organising collectively to live and work in both urban and rural contexts, funding for artists working in socially engaged arts practice was initiated in the latter half of the 20th

Century as governments aimed to connect a wider range of audiences to the arts. Recognition of this broader role of art in society and inclusion,

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also expanded who might be understood

as makers of art. Following programmes like the New Deal in post-war America, government subsidy or artists emphasised regionalism, social realism, working class aesthetics, and audience participation. With movement towards cultural democracy ideals, the mainstream aesthetic became diversified and 'community' began to permeate the art world.

Here are two unique examples to explore this 'turn to community'[27] to illuminate the social forms of these creative artist residency practices. The first example I will use is a program developed by the Saskatchewan Arts Board (SAB), an arms-length provincial arts agency in Canada. SAB has been funding community organisations and municipalities to pay artists a full time salary since its inception as the first North American arts board in 1948.[28] These early placements in the 1960s and 1970s drew artists from other cities and also from within the local community. Artist George Glenn moved from the other side of the country in 1975 to become an 'artist in residence' in a Saskatchewan town that at the time had very little

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casu cultural infrastructure. When I spoke to him forty

years later, in spite of still residing in Prince Albert, the artist still feels like the ‘artist in residence’ - reporting the sense that even of always being an “outsider - someone who provides critical feedback to emerging artists or can give an alternative voice as a professional advocate.”[29]

This outsider - insider dichotomy is heavily debated within residency practices,[30] balancing the interests of understanding the local context and the need for that external critical eye.

In this unique programme, ‘artists in residence’ are generally employed for a full year. Contracts dictate the artist must work on community projects for fifty-per-cent of their time and the other half of their time is focused on their individual practice. This assists the public arts funder in their advocacy aims to communicate the value of the arts to the broader society, and in turn, has raised the level of working conditions for the artist. An ‘artist in residence’, similar to the UK Artist Placement Group (APG), is hosted by non-arts organisations across a range of sectors.[31] The APG created institutional and organisational placements for

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artists to research, develop, and create artworks in a public context. The relationship between the hosts and artists were to be meaningful and reciprocal. Like SAB programs, art making was no longer a private endeavour in the studio or commercial in the gallery. SAB has funded artists to work in potash mines, employment centres, hospitals, and disability service sectors. Strategic pilot artist in residence projects have run in National Parks, schools and have been undertaken in science, government and first nations reserve contexts.

My second example here follows the work of second wave feminist performance artist and activist, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, who became known for her service-oriented art. As a self-proclaimed artist in residence for the New York City's Sanitation Department, she wrote her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* in 1969.[32] Ukeles shook the hands of thousands of sanitation workers, thanking them for keeping New York safe. Ukeles was an activist examining the role of domestic work but also drawing attention to the stigmatisation of these workers in the public sector. Later, she would choreograph a ballet-like parade for steam rollers and garbage barges bringing the skills of these workers into public display. The strength of Ukeles' work is not it only longevity over

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40 years, but also the durational elements to the work including relationships over time registered through meticulous and extensive photo documentation.

This expanded role of art into society has implications for the capacity of artists and the skills they now require to work in the public realm. Curator Nato Thompson claims that artists now function like ethnographers, anthropologists, community workers, or organisational consultants within real world situations[33] and artist educator Pablo Helguera expects this disciplinary ambiguity can enable unexpected possibilities for social transformation to emerge.[34] While still under-theorised, the field of socially engaged arts is vibrant and growing infiltrating not only public programs with a mandate for access but also elements of the contemporary art industry that have previously benefited more private interests including art fairs, biennale exhibitions, and now artist residencies.

These examples are not isolated instances of what I have described as a socially engaged artist residency. The year-long duration of the SAB's programme, Artist Placement Group projects, and Ukeles' long term commitment to NYC's

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sanitation department offers the time required for

relationships to be developed between artists, communities and institutions. With extended duration, the socially engaged artist often breeds personal connections that last longer and deeper than the programme itself while some artists report a short tenure opens up possibility for more intensity and risk.

- Residencies often have institutional contexts

With this recent ‘turn to community’ in the arts across government and institutional contexts, there are a number of programs where artists are invited to apply for residency opportunities. Artists are curated or awarded roles as guest faculty, fellows, and other distinguished and competitive titles to be listed on their CVs. Beyond larger institutions like museums, galleries, or libraries, there is a large network of residencies, which invite writers and artists to submit applications to be hosted in a venue of cultural heritage significance. Artists are provided a live-work space and hosts have a ‘public good’ function for their cultural and often heritage venue. While forms of retreats and colonies remain today, the functions of residencies have shifted over time by means of both policy

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and artistic drivers.

The 'artist house' or cultural heritage residency genre is well known across the world. The Laughing Waters Artist Residency is located in the secluded bushland setting of Parks Victoria near Eltham, Australia. Nillumbik Shire Council managed two properties where local and international artists were selected to stay in residence and work on their individual practices for extended periods of time. The residency is a way for the local government to support artists but also to draw attention to these significant buildings. Supporting artists in residence at these iconic mud brick houses properties is one strategy in valuing the cultural heritage of the buildings they were created by and home to many important artists, architects and cultural figures in local history. Laughing Waters has become an international destination, hosting close to 100 artists over the last 15 years in these two home studio properties.[35] Named for the winding Yarra River nearby, Birrarung is a mud-brick house designed by Gordon Ford, built by Graham Rose in 1970, and its neighbor down the road is Riverbend, created by architect Alistair Knox. This heritage home residency model is essentially connected to the patronage system of the early retreats where properties have been donated to public institutions for the arts. As a part of

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~~the~~ cultural heritage of Nillumbik, Laughing Waters Artist Residency helps to define the local character and identity and tells the stories of the landscape and people through evidence left by generations of people within the Laughing Waters houses.

In recent years in Australia and elsewhere, there have also been an abundance of residencies that examine social and ecological sustainability in the context of climate change and global conflict, but practiced at the local level. The temporary isolated work environment at Laughing Waters heavily influences the residency artists' work. Artists of all disciplines spend time in these residencies, each bringing their own inspiration but leaving with a new personal connection to the local social and cultural histories in the two hectares of protected bush land. My fascination with the 'social turn' in artist residencies comes not only from my own itinerant creative practice but in my role as a university artist educator. With my American colleagues Ted Purves and Suzanne Cockrell, I convened an 'Artists Field School' at Laughing Waters as a way to examine residency as social form but also to test new pedagogic modes.[36] We hosted twenty-socially engaged

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artists to examine forms of encounter and exchange in the
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idyllic setting of the mud brick houses along the Yarra River. In this instance, the distinction between institutional and artist-initiated residency categories became blurred.

Art schools at universities around the world regularly host reputable artists as guest faculty so their students may benefit from external specialist critique or expert master classes. In return, the guests are offered access to studio and equipment facilities. One art school residency that pushes these more conventional institutional boundaries is the Canadian University of Lethbridge Indigenous Arts Residency Exchange. In partnership with RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, the program aims to “connect and expand Indigenous culture and explore ideas of Indigeneity” to develop and strengthen dialogue and knowledge exchange between Canada and Australia.[37] Artists are invited to undertake a six to eight-week residency with a generous stipend and the expectation of public lecture. Residencies not only provide time and space, but can also bring international reputation and broader networks.

- Residencies can promote cultural diplomacy

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This Indigenous artist's exchange program at RMIT or the larger scale program of Banff Centre for the Arts and Creativity, can also be framed as a cultural exchange or diplomacy experiences. It can be argued these residencies encourage cultural movement through relocation, [38] both regionally and internationally, and through this the process of networking between artists, cultural organisations and other stakeholders. In many instances, international partnerships based on the intent of reciprocal exchange play out between governments, resting upon the respective cultural policy frameworks and aspirations of each party. Not only is this a way for governments and organisations to build relations, [39] but this genre of residency has bred a new type of itinerant artist. Contributing to our understanding of artist mobility and transnationalism, "artists take on the role of travellers, witnesses, ambassadors and purveyors of national/cultural identity." [40] In this way, artists seek experiences of 'the local' in communities not their own, often in intercultural contexts.

Like the Saskatchewan Arts Board in Canada, AsiaLink Arts and Australia Council for the Arts fund specific programmes of to both support artists to develop their own work and but also to instrumentally achieve their own mandates. While SAB

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focused on hosting artists to engage locally, AsiaLink funds Australian artists to practice overseas in Asian countries. The programme has developed from a loose partnership-funding model[41] focused on social change and development,[42] to what can be described today as a leading international sophisticated cultural diplomacy programme. These residencies emphasise importance of meaningful and multi-layered cultural exchange and immersion into another culture.[43]

This burgeoning field of artist residencies has garnered limited theorisation[44] and the impacts of residency outcomes have not been systematically assessed. Residencies are increasingly provided funding from all levels of government in most Western democracies, yet little is known about the value of residencies for artists' practices, impacts for institutions, or consequences in local communities. International residencies in particular have received criticism, including concern for lack of flexibility,[45] the absence of engagement with local communities, and the circulation of elitism and privilege. Paula Bialski describes these nomadic artists as highlighting a sort of labour flexibility.[46] Exploring

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the uneasy relationship between

residencies and sustainability, art writer Laura Kenins has described artists as “escapists and jet-setters” who may overlook the impact of carbon heavy travel to exotic or remote locations. When artists work in communities not their own, it is important to be aware there is potential to unintentionally reproduce colonial relationships, whereby residency hosts may “court foreign artists under the guise of enlightening the locals.” [47] Socially-engaged artists hosted in far-flung locations have been labelled by Gregory Pryor as ‘fly in, fly out workers’ who have ‘permanent’ homes off-site.[48] In the mining industry in Western Australia, FIFO workers financially benefit from their time in remote contexts while reciprocating very little relevance or value to the locals.

There are hundreds of residencies that situate artists in unique international contexts including military residencies to sponsor ‘war artists’, arts based international development programmes, and government funded international

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residencies are also tested historical ways to open up
markets for cultural industries. My aim is not to actively
critique the work of socially engaged artists who
participate in artist residencies, but to draw attention to
the potential for harm created when expectations of artists,
institutions and communities are not clarified and
explicitly negotiated.

Social Practice Residencies: collectivity, duration and
context

Finally, building on what I have described as the 'social
turn' is a new mode of contemporary art, which, at its
centre, examines social relations and everyday life.
Socially practice artist residencies can be performative,
collaborative, experimental, durational, non-material and is
often in public view of society. Small to mid-sized
contemporary arts organisations and artist-run centres
regularly host internationally renowned artists in their
local programming. These new forms of artist-initiated
residency projects are curated or collaboratively devised to
explore a curatorial theme or particularly salient idea.
Socially-engaged residencies can bring artists together who
share an interest in a conceptual or geographical site. In
recent years, there have been an abundance of residencies

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that examine sustainability and mobility in the context of
climate change and global conflict. These residencies
consider the relationship between the local and the global.
Perhaps as critique of the art world itself, these
residencies are situated far outside the institution - even
'off the grid' in grassroots or alternative contexts.

A shared experimental arts program of Performance
Space and ArtsHouse, *NOMAD: Time Place Space* takes
place annually over ten days to 'explore issues
of economic downturn, scarcity and transience,
of place and nationhood.'" [49] Camping with only the bare
necessities of life and art-making, the arts residency
looks for opportunities to scope out more sustainable
ways of working and provocations to bust open artistic
boundaries. With similar ecological aims,
David Buckland's Cape Farewell project
brought together a group of art and science
thinkers to explore a common theme in unique
ways, such as a travelling ship across the
Arctic Circle. [50] Residencies are not distinguished
from other projects just by the element of place,
but also of time. Durational residencies may not
just be time in a particular place, but can involve
a journey. 23 Days at Sea, a program facilitated by

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Access Gallery in Vancouver, takes place on a cargo

ship to China.[51] The boat is limited in facilities such as equipment and materials, so emphasis is placed on the experience of the journey, not necessarily on material making. Artists shift into a notion of 'seeking' and examine closely the politics of international trade and structures of national geographical borders. Access Gallery explains how artists selected for this residency are interested in travel and international trade.

These kinds of experimental social art residencies are growing in popularity as the possibility for short term projects in diverse locations becomes more interesting for the itinerant artist, via funding for specific, one-off projects, suited to particular disciplinary artists and communities, and cheaper for regional or international travel. Social arts practice and subsequent residencies tend to critique the cultural hierarchy with the central focus taken off the notion of the individual isolated artist and onto a focus on a particular located problem. As questions or provocations, residency themes may engage artists in greater contemporary political and social concerns.

Departing from the static elements of more conventional residencies found at institutions, these alternative social forms of residency widen the role of the artist as object

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maker to artist as community maker.

Towards 'life-as-practice'

What these retreats, artist communities, and residencies offer is what I designating as *artist residency as social form*. While more traditional residencies offer 'time off' to produce new work, new modes of art and social practice challenge the idea of the material outcome. Previously, the structure of residency programmes has the act of being hosted in a particular place, 'in residence'; however, this paper largely has dealt with concepts of the social in relation to being hosted as an artist in a community context, within an institutional mandate or together with other artists in over a time based educational or travelling journey. Artists now get away on residencies to get to work together with other artists and communities.

When artists discuss experiences of Banff Centre of the Arts and Creativity, The MacDowell Colony or any number of artist-initiated residencies and colonies, it is easy to confuse one with the other when elements of time and social life are discussed. Banks asked

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“Why is the MacDowell formula so wonderfully favourable to creativity?” (1999, 11) He discussed the artist colony in the natural setting, the “womb-like” security of each studio, and unbroken days of solitude. At each of these leading residency programmes, the physical needs of the artists are taken care of through good food, simple lodgings and the social taken care of having access to peers in the communal dining hall. The Guest Master at the Benedictine Monastery that hosts St Peter’s Artist Colonies in Canada, like Banks, explained these “short term but intensive social encounters lead often to artistic collaboration, friendship and, sometimes, even marriage.”[52]

It seems the formula for successful residencies is more than simply providing an artist with good working conditions, but also that the artist understands the needs of the host. This guest-host paradigm reigns true whether the residency is an awarded position, paid opportunity, or artist-initiated. There is an inherent reciprocal relationship with host or local stakeholders, as artists once had within the patronage in retreat and colony settings.

These many approaches of residency practice appear to shift how artists organise their lives resulting in new social

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models, which demand personal and professional

transformation towards one of two artistic identities, which integrate practice and life. Considering these residency genres as social form, we see artists shifting towards the new breed of transnationalism or alternately to practices with an increased focus on the local. The itinerant artist builds a practice into the global art discourse of biennales and seemingly 'othering' oneself into these short-term relationships with place and people. These less material practices and methodologies of the travelling artist are required to constantly shift into multiple and changing contexts. Conversely, other artists may reject this system of moving from residency to residency, seeking the creation of a lifework balance on a smaller immediate geographical scale.

Reminiscent of colony aspirations for social economy, now we increasingly see many mid-career artists leaving expensive and fast paced contemporary urban contexts to move to smaller centres to make their homes and studios. Using their practice to benefit their immediate neighbourhoods and social in what they hope to be a more sustainable way. The 'social turn,' here, functions to amplify the local so that artists may sustain more fully integrated patterns of life-work practice.

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