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

Written by Marnie Badham

Residencies typically provide artists with the required time and space away from their usual obligations of everyday life to research, develop and produce new creative work. They may also provide a range of resources like a studio or equipment and connections with creative peers or new audiences. Over the past two decades, there has been a worldwide increase in the number of residencies and their diverse forms.[1] This article explores what I describe as the social life of artist residencies by drawing attention to the communal relationships developed between fellow residency artists and by means of artistic and institutional practices that seek to engage with communities. On the one hand, thinking about social form can include retreats, colonies, and artist-run initiatives, which may take a particular topical curatorial focus such as sustainability. On the other hand, cultural institutions may extend their interests in public engagement by hosting creatives in cultural heritage houses, galleries or universities or through community interventions stemming from cross-sectoral partnerships by placing artists at work in hospitals, prisons, remote communities, or in national parks.

While artist residencies seemed to once be an endeavor of creative solitude, the preoccupation with 'the social' in contemporary residencies can be located in the historical lineage of early artist colonies and systems of social exchange.[2] Since the turn of the century, artists have sought the inspiration of the utopian landscape - leaving industrialised cities through both retreat and patronage to find good working conditions.[3] Nowadays, many international residencies aim to provide opportunities for socially and politically motivated artists to develop site-responsive projects for public interaction with local

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community members. The recent unpredictable explosion of aasd ~~artist residencies has produced a range of social forms over~~ the last century: shifting from what can be described as a more traditional institutional model of patronage with artists laboring on material works in isolated studios - to contemporary forms of social practice projects working collectively or by making art with local communities to explore contemporary global concerns. This shift from the individual to the collaborative and the private to the public in residencies extends the ‘social turn,’ which now permeates the contemporary art world.[4]

Offering a broad ranging typology of residencies as ‘social form’ by drawing on local and global examples, this paper first explores the historical social roots of residencies and then considers community-engaged, institutional, and international forms, before describing the re-emerging trend of artists seeking sustainable practices at a local scale. Political shifts from most Western governments over recent decades towards the democratisation of the arts position institutional interests also on engagement between artists and the public. This broader social impact in the arts makes way for the consideration for alternative artist-run initiatives and new contemporary social art practices. The paper concludes with both ‘itinerant’ and ‘localvore’ approaches to how artists practice through a new category of residency theorised as ‘life-as-practice’.

An expanded social role for art, artists, and institutions

The relationship between art making and community making has played out by artists through a range of aesthetic forms described as relational, situational, participatory, or public practice leading to what was first described by art critic Claire Bishop as the ‘social turn’ in the arts.[5] Typically working outside of the gallery system in neighbourhoods or community centres, socially engaged artists use people and their contexts as form and content of

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their artworks to draw attention to contemporary political

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~~issues and to affect local social conditions. This wildly~~ diverse and expanding field of socially-engaged arts has infiltrated almost every element of the arts industry including growing government and philanthropic funding, post-secondary arts education, and the way cultural institutions such as art galleries and museums do their business. While many artists have opened up their aesthetic processes moving past the more traditional commercial or material interests, so too have the institutions which fund, present, and disseminate contemporary art practice now become interested in stimulating increased social interaction in the arts.

Bishop's 'social turn' in contemporary art can be extended into a broader landscape of community arts and cultural development, theorists have been unable to define a particular style, form or aesthetic; but like any other discipline, this approach to practice is underpinned by a particular set of principles and ethics.[6] This 'social turn' includes a range of collaborative practices with my research drawing particular attention to "practices [that] are less interested in a relational aesthetic than in the creative rewards of collective activity".[7] Maria Lind's 'collaborative turn' is also useful frame in which she explains a number of relational, dialogic, participatory, social and connective approaches in art making. Lind argues the collaborative turn is enacted by artists "as a way of creating room for its practitioners to manoeuver around instrumentalizing effects of both the art market and publicly financed art alike."[8]

Aiming to reconfigure the relationship between art, artists and audiences, artist Suzanne Lacy described the progression of this practice a decade earlier as *New Genre Public Art:* "For the past three or so decades visual artists of varying backgrounds and perspectives

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have been working in a manner that resembles political and social activity but [which] is distinguished by its aesthetic sensibility."[9] A diverse spectrum of practice is purposefully described here: extending from forms of community arts and cultural development to social practice and experimental art. Kim Charnley suggests that within the field, "clear tensions are involved in current understanding of artists' attempts to engage with the social through some form of collaborative, dialogic or relational practice."[10] These tensions she refers to can be located in art historical propositions and binary debates valuing collaborative processes and community engagement over aesthetic outcomes.[11]

Artist residency as social form

By exploring this expanded social role and responsibility of artists intervening in the contemporary issues of society, the examination of artist residencies brings together key questions in socially engaged arts practice regarding shared labour, authorship and the relationships between artists, communities and institutions as they navigate this 'social turn'. As these artists focus on the politically charged issues within the interrelated contexts of environmental disaster, mass migration and global conflict, they also engage with local communities to make sense of these pressing issues. Examining the relationship between international artist residencies with these recent developments of socially engaged arts practice can not only help us understand their social value, but also mitigate unintended negative consequences of working in this way.

While many artist residency programs claim social outcomes through local engagement, there is sometimes an uneasy

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relationship between artistic, institutional and community

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~~motivations. The risk of instrumentalising the arts and~~

clarity of stakeholder expectations within the often unpredictable creative and community process of socially engaged arts require careful negotiation. These are both practical and conceptual concerns for stakeholders to consider including the potential for harm when institutional hosts invite guest artists to engage with communities not their own. These concerns can be amplified when artists are travelling to new cultural contexts or wanting to make work with vulnerable communities about issues they are less familiar with.

International residencies can encourage cultural movement through short term relocation of artists[12] and it has been argued they can assist governments and organisations to build relations[13] through promotion of cultural diplomacy aims of exchange and engagement. These opportunities have bred a new genre of itinerant artist with transnational practice and socially engaged artists are seeking international residencies less for isolation and more for experiences of ‘the local’ in communities not their own. International residencies today have become less about supporting isolated practice of artists and more about using art as a way collectively responding to the global challenges of our time.

Many arts organisations and funding programs now include residencies for both local and international artists, investing in social value by connecting politically-motivated artists with programs concerned with community engagement and citizen empowerment. While many cities and local governments previously funded festivals to showcase local culture and attract cultural tourism, residencies have been a popular ingredient in promoting cultural diplomacy and intercultural understanding as of

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late. Kocache argues these residencies encompass a new movement towards the interdisciplinary, observing the expansion of art “from a fine arts-based practice to one that spills into and borrows from the spheres of the humanities and the social sciences, which suggest the development of new critical, discursive and ideological residency models.”[14] These practices may take the form of short-term self-directed activities or cross-sectoral partnerships addressing local issues by collaborating with justice, health or international development. This is a substantial shift in the cultural landscape, establishing renewed relationships between art, institutions, and communities, reminiscent of the social motivations of the community arts movement over previous decades in many Western countries, but perhaps with increased attention to aesthetics more recently.

Critics Hal Foster[15] and Claire Bishop[16] have each called for the analysis of the roles of institutions and government in shaping the forms and agendas of arts practice.[17] While sponsorship and public funding brings professional opportunities and better working conditions for artists, there are often broader neoliberal agendas tied up with these resources. Government funded residencies claim to achieve broad reaching social goals including established opportunities for audience development, public education, and contribution to ‘soft’ cultural diplomacy.[18] Residencies have become an important part of public engagement mandates of institutional bodies; however, as Martin Mulligan and Pia Smith have argued “there are huge cultural differences in the ways in which local government authorities and community art practitioners go about their work.”[19]

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Working across sectors and international destinations,
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~~residencies are reportedly largely positive experiences for~~ artist and hosts, but they can also require specialised skills to navigate the complex bureaucracies and ensuing relationships. Some practices are more aligned to these ways of working such as relationship building across time and therefore develop projects that can engage multiple stakeholders, which may have competing interests. A closer examination of residencies through the concepts of hospitality and conviviality may be useful to interrogate of the relationship between motivations of the 'artist guest' and 'institutional host' that configure artist residencies.

Retreats and Colonies: histories of patronage and social economy

Residential forms of today's 'sharing economy' rely on the communal interests of tenants, travelers and hosts to live in co-operative and intentional community lifestyles with neighbours who share similar values outside of mainstream societal processes. It may be useful to think though the social form of artist retreats and colonies that now influence forms of collective housing. From the idyllic rural working artist communes such as the MacDowall Colony in New Hampshire, USA and the Banff Centre for the Arts and Creativity in Alberta, Canada, to artist communes like Monsalvat or Dunmoochin in Victoria, Australia, these residential initiatives serve - on very different scales - as social alternatives to mainstream cultural economies.

Under historic systems of sponsorship, artists sought retreat from the everyday life with an interest in isolation to find good working conditions.[20] Colonies are often built in natural settings, with artists working side-by-side with their peers across all art forms while their physical requirements are supported in the form of shared meals and basic lodging. These social forms have functioned under systems of patronage, shared labour, and often untraditional yet practical work-live spaces. Internationally, there are hundreds of residential centres today founded as artistic, communal, or intentional communities. More than one hundred years ago, a farmhouse was erected on the woodlands of New

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Hampshire to become the infamous MacDowell Colony. This aasd ~~‘incubator’ for the creative arts was built on the vision of~~ composer Edward MacDowell and his wife Marian. It was founded on the premise and maintained that this home was to be “a colony where working conditions most favourable to the production of enduring works of the imagination, shall be provided for creative artists.”[21] Slowly building each studio one at a time, the MacDowall Colony resulted in the thirty-two studios, which remain scattered across the 450 acres of meadow and forests today. These retreats and colonies arose in the second half of the 1800s across Europe and America. Artists chased the inspiration of the utopian landscape by the invitation of wealthy patrons to produce a new work of art adopting a more social economy aligned with communal working and living off the land. Artist colonies have been described as a kind of utopia of natural beauty and creativity with artists leaving industrial cities.[22]

Nearby in the Rocky Mountains, the Banff Centre for Art and Creativity is arguably host to one of the world’s largest and most diverse multidisciplinary residency programmes. With systems of artist-paid tuition and philanthropic, government and business sponsorship, Banff Centre offers a range of residency models including themed group pedagogic experiences. Sheltered away in the woods of the campus, the Leighton Artists’ Colony hosts self-directed residencies for artists. Time at the colony “offer[s] artists the ability to delve into their work as a solitary retreat, as well as the option to engage within the larger artistic community.”[23] Located up the mountain away from the hustle of tourist Banff, artists’ are provided simple yet practical lodgings and work space.

As importantly, social care is taken by having access to peers for debriefing the work day over shared meals. This is the model provided by St Peter’s Artist and Writers Colonies in nearby Saskatchewan, also in Canada. Abbot Peter at St Peter’s Abbey in Muenster, explains the artist colonies as short term but intensive social encounters that lead often to artistic collaboration and relationships. When asked about what motivates the Benedictine monastery to host

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artists and writers on site in partnership with Canadian

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~~Artists representation (CARFAC) Sask and the Saskatchewan~~ Writers Guild, he offers a smile with his explanation, “We have something beautiful here, why wouldn’t we want to share it?” and goes on to discuss the relationship between the church, state and support for the arts.[24] St Peter’s Abbey continues this system of patronage but also through sharing economy. Artists, writers, and students can work on their organic farm for exchange of room and board.

Over in Australia within the bushlands of Parks Victoria, an hour’s drive out of Melbourne, the feeling of isolation and inspiration quickly connects one back through histories of artist retreats and colonies. This is not a distant memory in the uncultivated rolling hills of Nillumbik’s ‘green wedge shire,’ where many artists live today in close relationship with nature. This romantic desire to escape urban life in search of the beauty of the rural landscape can be traced back to early colonial settlements in Australia but continues today with those looking for a ‘tree change.’ The cultural heritage of the area boasts historical colonies of Monsalvat and Dunmoochin. The Jorgensen and Skipper families founded Monsalvat in 1934 to support all forms of the arts and, today, the historic property continues as a creative hub and cultural tourism destination in the Yarra Valley. Not far away, the collaborative efforts of Dunmoochin[25] began in the 1950s through the group purchase of land in Cottles Bridge. Clifton Pugh, one of the colony’s most reputable artists, bequeathed a considerable art collection and residential properties so that today the Dunmoochin Foundation can continue supporting artists, researchers and environmentalists.

These artist colonies are examples of the reliance on investment of patrons but also commodity exchange amongst artists. But it could be argued these ways of organizing work and life also initiated a trend of artist mobility. Commissioned artists travelled to work and live at the residence of a patron to seek both solitude to complete their work and commune in shared values for working conditions. Today, time working in a colony or residential

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program is an important professional step in many artists' development.

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The second part of this article will appear in Seismopolite issue 19.

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