Where Are We Now? And How Do We Work?

Introduction

Historically, artists have operated in relationship with institutions: be that churches commissioning religious artefacts; support from rich patrons; or even contemporary galleries selling artists' work. Although the landscape may have shifted over time, artists continue to find themselves working within, for, or in opposition to various institutions and institutional policies. Today's artist residency programmes have come to play a significant role in the ways artists and institutions alike research, network and develop interdisciplinary practice. While the reasons vary as to why artists and institutions are interested in these programmes, participating in artist residencies has become almost as much of a professional requirement for artists as obtaining an MFA or PhD.

The recent Connect/Exchange panel discussion hosted by The NewBridge Project served to raise questions and initiate discussion around how the current proliferation of residencies is acting to delineate/define/control artistic practice. The collection of speakers at the event represented a range of experiences and perspectives, from the institutional perspective - including curator at the CCA (Glasgow) Remco de Blaaij, and Suzy O'Hara who is an accomplished curator, arts producer and project manager working within local authority contexts – to artistic experiences, including Rosie McLachlan who recently undertook a residency at C.E.R.N. and Chris Paul Daniels who is artist-in-residence at The NewBridge Project as part of Connect/Exchange. The panel was led and hosted by Alexia Mellor, a site-responsive practitioner whose works often comes out of long-term residency projects within communities. Bringing together these professionals who share a very direct relationship to artist residencies, the discussion invited a critical inquiry into "*where are we now?*" and "*how do we work*?"

Historical Contexts

The contemporary model of an Artist in Residence has a long and complicated lineage. One could argue that the notion of an artist working within/for/with an institution has its roots in the artisans and crafts persons that were subjects and employees of royal courts and monarchical powers. As the nature of power shifted from Courts to Churches in the Renaissance era, we see the same model of artists working with institutions with artists like Michelangelo being indentured to the Medici Popes in the early 1500s. Similarly, in the 1700s wealthy patrons would employ artists in the ilk of Thomas Gainsborough and even the romantic notions of artists in the 1900's like Renoir and Picasso were financially supported by the wealthy Henri-Louis-Ambroise Vollard. The history of artists 'working' is a history of patronage, and it was the predominant processes through which artists found financial and ideological support. Indeed, the notion of finances exchanged for artistic merit is as true in today's residency-based world as it was in the early mediaeval period.

The notion of artists working within institutions in a non-patronage manner only really begins to emerge with projects such as the Artist Placement Group (APG) in the 1960s and 70s. APG sought to rethink "the role of the artist's place in society...in which the artist undertakes a placement with a company or government body."[1] However, the notion of being supported by an institution without the expectations of reciprocity – or indeed the exchange of services - were too much for some of these early projects, as illustrated by one of the Artist placement Group's hosts Peter Byron: "*If a man wants to overthrow the capitalist system, I don't see why, as a capitalist, I should provide the money for him to do it[2]*". The placements and residences devised by APG were quickly disbanded and funding declined, however, their groundbreaking concept paved the way for much of the various residency projects that exist today.

Contemporary Concerns

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[1] Bishop, Claire. Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship. London, Verso. 2012 P 166
[2] Stuart Brisley, interview with Peter Byrom (1975), cited in Katherine Dodd, Artists Placement Group 1966–1976, MA thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, 1992, p. 24. As quoted in Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London, Verso. 2012

It would be difficult to create an over-arching definition of an "Artist In Residence" due to the extreme diversity of the types of residencies and the contexts in which they take place – from scientific institutions such as C.E.R.N.; to recognised art institutions, both urban and rural; from collaborative partnerships between local authorities and research bodies, to designers working in businesses; from corporate institutions to political activism projects. The plethora of opportunities disavows a typical or traditional model of the artist-in-residency experience. At the Connect/Exchange panel, however, there were three major areas of inquiry that shed light on the issues surrounding contemporary residency programmes as a whole: expectations placed on and by the artist, the hosting institution, and the communities; research-based versus outcome-based residencies; and the need to remain an artist-as-researcher in interdisciplinary residencies. Embedded within this dialogue were questions around the types of exchanges that occur in artist residencies, and how we value them.

Managing Expectations

The common ground in all of the panel members' experiences, they agreed, was the necessity of finding a common language and agreement between both the institution and the artist on the 'expectations of exchange' in order to facilitate a productive experience for both parties. This included both the aesthetic and conceptual concerns – i.e., what is the residency about – but also practical issues, categorised by the notion of 'hosting' – i.e., how does the institution assist in integrating the artist as their guest, and to what extent. Alexia Mellor spoke of the concerns of artists being 'parachuted' into a situation - without the context being translated and explained - as being especially of concern for socially engaged practitioners working with communities and local people on subjects that are salient for them. It raises questions about the reasons for inviting artists to enter into a community and, additionally, without that translated experience, the artist would be unable to enact his/her practice ethically nor find common ground with the residents with whom he/she was working.

This has deep resonance with current research that explores the instrumentalisation of the artist-in-residence projects for specific ends – regeneration, social well-being, 'enrichment' etc. While this usually relates to residencies pertaining to socially engaged and participatory practices, it has applications in most contexts and is linked to the historical 'patronage' model wherein those with the money and power create opportunities for artists/artisans with the requirement of a product in exchange for support, such as the production of a public sculpture or a single work.

Local Authority and council-funded artist-in-residence projects are often linked to a financial, policy system. Therefore, questions around 'delivery' of concepts such as *regeneration, communications, profile, engagement, economic ambitions* are part of a defined agenda and linked to ideas and expectations of an 'outcome.' To what extent the artist could ever make manifest any of these outcomes is problematic, despite all good intentions, as concepts like 'regeneration' are subjective and therefore more difficult to measure than a singular, constructed and/or tangible artwork. Suzy O'Hara, however, suggested that it is possible to provide a positive working space for artists to deliver 'outcomes' in these types of residencies by being an excellent communicator and managing expectations of what is possible: for the artist, for the institution, and for the community. This requires regularly communicating understandings of aims and processes, leading to a sense of trust for all parties. This trust is crucial in order to create ambitious work, and to go in new and uncharted directions. Suzy suggests that the 'trick' is *"for the institution to provide the space for the artist to still have a 'residency' opportunity of research and making that allows them to 'bounce' into different directions that they (the institution, artists and participants alike) might not have expected or intended. This might provide 'new' and 'exciting' concepts, but still act as a 'buffer zone' between the 'delivery outcomes' and the 'artist'"*.

Research-based vs. Outcome-based Approaches

A residency based on 'free-form research' acts as a counterpoint to residencies with expectations of outcome. This notion of 'free-research' was advocated by the APG in a concept they called the 'open brief' and this has been adopted by many institutions contemporaneously and presented to

the artist in ways that allows them, as Remco de Blaaij said, "*to discover new poetry and being exposed to difference.*" This often occurs only by being physically present in another context, space, place, culture and challenged with a new way of thinking. The "*revelation of a residency*" occurs where the experience of a place reveals – and allows the artist to revel in – difference. This experience hopefully impacts not only the artist, but also the participants in the process and project, and hopefully an institution. The effect a residency might have on an artists' practice may not (and often doesn't) manifest at the specific moment of the residency, but at a later date, once the artist has returned to his/her normal environment and sees it anew. This seems to be the most profound impact of residencies, and Mellor suggested this concept of 'serendipity' – of not knowing the outcome or the reasons and being open to new concepts – was the most salient reason for undertaking a residency in the first place.

The extent to which an 'open brief' is ever truly offered was discussed by all in the panel, with examples from almost all who spoke about times when the assumption of the 'open brief' was discounted by the unspoken expectations from an institution. Arguably, the inconsistencies stemmed from a lack of understanding of the artist or artist processes/practices and all too often - especially in non-art institutions that invite an artist into their fold - there is a mismatch of knowledge about what art is 'for' and the expectations about what an artist can 'do' during the course of her/his residency. This 'open brief' approach therefore still requires some management of expectations and a shared common knowledge on the residency project. Often this requires education and learning from all parties.

Artist-as-Researcher

Rosie McLachlan raised the darker notion that residencies are often predicated on the artist acting as an "*illustrator to the place one visits*" or becoming glorified marketers/audience-builders for the institution. In this context, the artist has become subject to the purse-strings and a tool of those that pay one's wage and as such, the patronage model seems to have not evolved much beyond the artisans employed by the courts of the medieval period. The question of how we develop an artist residency that truly supports new, emergent and research-led thinking – the chance for serendipitous revelations – is one that is at the core of this inquiry.

Rosie argued that the solution rests with the artist her/himself. "*Go as an artist*" she suggested – not as an employee or an illustrator or as anything other than an artist, with an artist's ability to ask difficult questions and to be open to new experiences. The onus then is on both artist and institution to find a positive and productive match that clarifies expectations for the 'right kind of residency'. The counterpoint to that, however, is a critique that a 'matching up' might not evoke or reveal productive tensions and challenges in working models that may come from the 'wrong sort of residency'. This, however, might be a debate for another time, and more relevant to this text is a comment by Chris Paul Daniels, a current Connect/Exchange artist, who suggested that a way to think through the Artist-As-Researcher model is that *"the artist should not be treated as an animal but as a human: not locked in a studio making work, but able to be 'in the world' and respond to the context and culture, and arriving as an observer".* In this instance, he illustrates how a productive residency might occur: by being allowed to be an exploring, inquiring, observing artist – researching the new world around him/her.

Conclusion

Once the artist and Institution have together navigated the concerns of expectations, end-points and research of a residency-based project, they begin to partly answer the questions that the Connect/Exchange event discussed – 'where are we now' and 'how do we work'. As mentioned above, however, there are no "hard-and-fast" rules for any specific residency and so in order to think about the opportunities available in the present, it might be useful to think about what they could be in the future.

Philosopher Slavoj Žižek suggests that in order to think about the future success of a project, we should not engage in utopian dreaming, but instead think about its end: its fiery, apocalyptic

obliteration. And once we've imagined the worst possible failure of this project, we must work backwards from that horrific endpoint, ensuring that we correct all the things that could possibly go wrong in order that our project does not fail. This, we think, is true of both individual artist residencies, but also of the 'artist-in-residency' project as a whole.

Considering this, in what ways are we having utopian dreams about Artist in Residence projects? What is the future of the residency? How do we want them to succeed? Are there ways that we could think of residency projects differently that might offer greater success? What is the best residency that could be offered – and indeed, in what way could it fail?

It is only through answering how residencies might fail that we can begin to ensure their successes.

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