

A Century of Research and Developments: Artists' Residencies in the U.S.

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Our History

Artists' residencies are defined as organizations that provide dedicated time and space to artists of any discipline for the development of new work. Distinct from teaching or performance residencies, artists' residencies (also called artists' communities or colonies) are about artistic creation and place few if any expectations on the artists-in-residence to present their work.

The first artists' residencies were developed in the late 1800's and early 1900s – Utopian enclaves where creative genius was spun from the threads of conversation, communal living, and immersion in one's craft. They were not about *retreat* from the industry and fierceness of the city, but rather about *advancing* a different way of life. These first visionaries believed the right mix of solitude and solidarity could ignite the flames of creativity and foster our most important and enduring works of art. Over a century, artists' residencies have proven them right, nurturing the creative development of Marcel Duchamp, Alice Walker, Leonard Bernstein, James Baldwin, Truman Capote, Bill T. Jones, John Cage, Sylvia Plath, Allen Ginsberg, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Rauchenberg, David Sedaris, Spalding Gray, and thousands more.

The first half of the 20th century saw a modest growth in the field of artists' residency programs, and most operated in relative isolation – from general society and from each other. As research-and-development labs for the arts, artists' residencies serve creative people and process, knowing that the outcome of such work may never be tangible and the products – paintings and plays, songs and sculptures, dances, films, novels, etc. – may not be realized until months or years later. The contract between these organizations and their artists-in-residence is founded on trust – trust that the artist will use the opportunity of a residency to propel their work forward, trust that the creative process can take many forms, whether or not such forms look much like what we consider “work.” Such organizations have always had an uneasy relationship with the public, knowing that experimentation, creative risk-taking, and the formation of new ideas are sometimes best developed out from under the eye of a curious public or demands for presentation and production. Visitors might discover a poet swinging in a hammock or a painter walking through the woods and wonder why such privilege should be supported, as if art-making did not also require reflection and repose. Tensions between artists' residencies and the public remain today, more so as the economics of tax exemption commodify the value of supporting creative development.

While many of the early artists' residencies were founded on historic estates by wealthy benefactors, the 1960s and '70s birthed a new wave of residency programs that radically altered the landscape of the field: urban residencies, organizations that developed programs for the public, residencies based on mentorship or collaboration. The “back to the land” movement that inspired so many new residency programs recalled many of the same Utopian visions of a century ago, while flight to the suburbs left urban warehouses and gritty neighborhoods ripe for inner-city artists' colonies, as isolated in downtown Omaha as their counterparts in rural Georgia.

Fast-forward to 2010: There are over 400 artists' residencies in the United States (and an estimated more than 1,000 worldwide), supporting artists of every discipline by providing dedicated time and space for creative research and development. Many become a home-away-from-home, offering room and board as well as work space, while others provide studios and community for local artists. Almost all have public programs of some nature, some involving the artists-in-residence, some not. And while new artists' residencies are still being created from the original artists' colony model, others are embedded within museums, community development corporations, cultural centers, schools, and other organizations.

The Field's Accomplishments

For a field with such an ephemeral focus, it is hard to pinpoint its accomplishments in quantifiable terms. Is it in the thousands of works of art created while in-residence – works like Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*, Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*? The awards these works have earned? The number of artists provided with residencies each year? Those alumni who have received MacArthur "Genius" Fellowships? Or do we recognize the number of new programs created, their ability to garner grant funding, the capital campaigns successfully completed, their ability to simply survive?

It is an incredible thing to tell an artist, "We choose you for your promise, we offer you this gift, we trust you to use it as you see fit." When you do not dictate the outcome, how do you measure success?

In recent years, several U.S. residency programs have celebrated their centennials – The MacDowell Colony, Ox-Bow, Woodstock-Byrdcliffe Guild, and Yaddo – and that is certainly accomplishment enough. No less an accomplishment is the creation of new programs each year that respond to the needs of their communities and to artists in new ways: programs like Billings Forge in Hartford, Connecticut, providing residencies to local artists in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the country, within a broader mission of social justice and community development; or the Institute for Sustainable Living, Art & Natural Design (ISLAND) in Bellaire, Michigan, which connects people with nature, art, and community, and will welcome its first artists-in-residence this year. Anniversary dates are an opportunity to reflect on the slow changes that have developed over time, rather than single moments of recognition: Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, now in its 20th year, turned a blighted neighborhood into a thriving arts-and-culture community while nurturing the creative development of hundreds of artists in a warehouse in Omaha. Other anniversaries are bittersweet: Dorland Mountain Art Colony, five years after a wildfire destroyed all of its buildings, last year laid the foundations of its new cabins which will soon offer silence and solitude to artists again. During its centennial year in 2007, and just ten years after receiving the National Medal of Arts by President Bill Clinton, The MacDowell Colony won its New Hampshire Supreme Court case upholding its tax-exempt status, which the Town of Peterborough had challenged on the grounds that MacDowell did not contribute to the public good.

Before the Alliance of Artists Communities was formed in 1991 as an association of artists' residency programs – with seed money from The MacArthur Foundation and eighteen founding members – there was no sense of a "field," no collective voice to chronicle the accomplishments

of artists' residencies or advocate on their behalf. In the nineteen years since, the Alliance has nurtured dozens of new residency programs, worked with funding partners to invest millions in new resources in the field, provided numerous programs to artists of all kinds, published seven books and dozens of reports on the field, and partnered with its international counterpart – Res Artis – in addressing the needs of the field worldwide. In November 2008, the National Endowment for the Arts created a new funding category called Artist Communities, for organizations whose primary purpose is providing artists' residencies. Then-Chairman Dana Gioia wrote, "I have always understood the critical role that Artist Communities play in American culture. You are a unique field whose main focus is on the individual artist. You play an irreplaceable role in this nation's artistic creativity and vision." As the first new funding category at the NEA in over a decade, as a significant recognition for residencies as a distinct field, and as a tool for leveraging greater visibility and support, the creation of this new category and the Alliance's partnership with the NEA in shaping it was a huge accomplishment and one that will continue to benefit the field for many years to come.

But the field's greatest collective accomplishment is its steadfast commitment to supporting artists in the development of new work, despite enormous pressure to focus on production, to whittle away at the time offered to artists-in-residence with other expectations to teach and present their work, to fill every space with events and programs that crowd the nooks and crannies of privacy for contemplation, and to develop metrics that demonstrate impact in dollars and numbers rather than transformation and discovery.

What's Next

With as many different types of artists and ways of working, there is no single approach to artists' residencies. Over the last century, the field has adapted to meet the changing needs of artists, with each program finding its own balance of solidarity and solitude, public and private. For some artists, a month in a secluded cabin in the woods is exactly what's needed to push his or her work forward, while other artists thrive on shorter bursts of intense collaboration and exchange, or a year's immersion in a new community. Artists' residencies are addressing other changes as well: meeting the needs of interdisciplinary artists that challenge the selection process, facilities, and resources of the organization; adapting to new technologies; remaining accessible to artists who may be under-the-radar as the art world becomes increasingly professionalized and networked.

The Alliance's vision for the field is to continue to be responsive to the needs of artists in their creative development – to assess our organizations with the same creative inquiry we admire in artists; to recognize who is not being well served by the field and challenge ourselves to ask what we can do differently; to know what is sacred about our organizations and what we can shed as we evolve; to find new ways of nurturing artists over longer spans of time, whether through repeat residencies, alumni networks, or virtual communities; to give in to our endless desire to support artists more holistically by seeking partners who can fill the gaps rather than spreading ourselves thin taking on programs that do not represent our greatest strengths; to continue asking "what makes creativity thrive?" and challenge artists' (and our own) notions of solitude and engagement. We also strive for a more sustainable field, by developing organizational models that do not presume endless growth or immortality, or that explore ways of diminishing our dependence on facilities and infrastructure, for example. The diversity of the field ensures that

artists' residencies will continue to be relevant and valuable to artists, though our ability to advocate on our own behalf, and thus develop the resources to do our work, remains a challenge.

The Alliance's vision for how the field of artists' residencies and the values it represents can have a stronger role in the larger arts sector and in society in general depends on greater visibility of and value in artists and their art-making process. We consume products – the books, performances, films and exhibitions – with little understanding of the process and the people involved in their creation, with little thought that art-making is in fact *work* and deserving of time, space, and pay rather than the *queue-it-in-at-2am-on-the-kitchen-table-while-the-kids-are-sleeping-and-before-going-to-my-real-job* approach we have settled for and in fact romanticized. And while some recent trends indicate that the creative process is increasingly important to corporate and community sectors alike, the end result is still often a commodification of the process, demonstrating how much productivity has increased or by how many points test scores have risen. How do you measure the impact of hearing an author labor over his own text, or watching a dance unfold for the first time, or allowing an artist to turn a corner in their art that leads to bold and powerful new work?

“Art for art’s sake” is insufficient, and today the arts advocacy landscape is littered with economic impact studies and graphs on the so-called creative economy. But these do not tell the whole story, and are woefully inadequate for small organizations, particularly those that seek to fill a niche or support an underserved community. Artists' residencies need better data to support their cause, to be sure, but statistics and anecdotes must go hand-in-hand, and we can't have enough of either to make a compelling case for supporting artists in their creative work. Rather than contort the field into a series of numbers to show the impact of artists' residencies on society, the Alliance envisions a field that is better able to articulate its value (qualitatively and quantitatively), an arts sector that is willing to challenge the notion that we can and should measure everything in numerical and financial terms, and a society that is willing to invest in the intangibility of process by sharing our trust that providing artists with an environment in which creativity thrives will generate new work and ideas that will rock our world.

Some Strategies for Getting There

- Be part of a national “Art Comes From Artists” campaign.
- Develop artist ambassadors for the field, not just for individual residency programs.
- Tell the artists' stories – what a creative practices looks like, how a residency is transforming, what the long-term impact of a residency can be.
- Develop national activities that the whole field can participate in locally – e.g., Open Studios Month – to show the collective strength and breadth of the field.
- A residency is not an isolated event for an artist. Partner with other organizations that support artists and new work to connect a residency to the other stages of creating new work – development, presentation, production, etc. – to demonstrate how all the steps are critical.
- Conduct research that can better portray the field, and participate in national research so that residency programs and the support they provide are included in the cultural landscape.
- Partner with other artist-centered institutions to present joint studies on support for individual artists today.