



CAS Hosting Artists: Museums Residencies 26 May 2022 at Delfina Foundation, London

Hosting Artist Residencies: Institutional tensions and accountabilities

By Mandy Merzaban, Brooks Fellow Tate Research and Interpretation

Held in the project space of Delfina Foundation on 26 May 2022, the *CPD Hosting Artists 2: Radical Residencies* seminar convened art professionals from major museums across the UK to discuss the different ways institutions and artists interact through residencies. The morning session began with three presentations followed by a Q&A, while in the afternoon participants were divided into thematic focus groups. The speakers included UK-based artists Joy Gregory and Shiraz Bayjoo and via Zoom, and Yazid Anani, the head curator and director of public programmes at A.M. Qattan Foundation in Palestine. The artists shared first-hand experiences of residencies in a largely informative and explanatory way, highlighting their particular journeys working with and through their host institutions. Speaking from the perspective of a residency organiser, Yazid's presentation offered a critical deep dive into the ways in which short time-bound, outcome focused residencies can often encourage 'political tourism' and offered residency approaches that build artists' accountabilities and connections to local communities.

Some of the critical questions and themes that arose across the seminar centred on the institutional forces that shape the relationships and expectations institutions have of artists and vice versa. The factors that condition these relationships and expectations include the structure and support of residencies, whether financial or intellectual, the degrees of access artists have or don't have to historical collections, and the strategies behind and implications of diversity mandates of some recent residency opportunities. How do artists integrate into rigid institutional structures that may not be readily equipped to respond to their intellectual or practical needs? Is the interest in promoting underrepresented artists through residencies a way of virtue signalling, giving institutions the appearance of inclusive practices and values? The latter of these questions around underrepresented groups also emerged within a seminar context that had its own palpable lack of diversity in its participants. The question of anti-racist

practice in spaces of predominantly white professionals is also relevant to consider as part of the replication of underrepresentation that we are trying to address.

Interestingly however, all of the speakers at this seminar were people of colour imparting their experiences and projects that largely considered different dimensions of colonial legacies in institutions. The presentations began with artist Joy Gregory. A resident of The Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM) in Exeter, Joy began the session with an overview of her past experiences with residencies internationally and within the UK. Throughout her presentation, she emphasised how the interpersonal dimensions of residencies and building relationships with the people involved are what make them valuable and generative. Giving the example of her own residency at RAMM in 2020, Joy described how a close working relationship with the curator was vital to how her project unravelled, citing how their thoughtful insights and genuine investment surfaced relevant and unexpected aspects of the collection. Due to the pandemic, the residency was a hybrid of both online and in-person correspondences with the museum that included being able to navigate and interact with the collection in proximate ways. This included being able to access a textile work in the collection that ultimately compelled Gregory to make her first work in fabric. The research and final textile piece, *The Sweetest Thing*, critically responds to and reckons with the insidious nature of an 18th-century embroidered linen panel from the collection. It features the household of a land-owning family posing with their enslaved Black servants as a way to flaunt their aristocratic lifestyle, one that is ultimately afforded by the violence of the transatlantic slave trade. Gregory's work, which was ultimately acquired by the museum, offers a critical provocation to this violence, by bringing together dimensions of the slave trade's local reality in Devon with sites of exploitation elsewhere.

As a Delfina Foundation fellow in the collecting-as-practice programme in 2021, Shiraz unravelled the different approaches he used to navigate living and archival collections across the UK. With a focus on his work through Delfina Foundation and Kew Gardens, Shiraz shared a number of insights and questions that emerged in his research that inspect the relationship between the extractive economies of colonialism with the form and function of botanical collections. Some of these dimensions included archival materials such as directors' letters that encouraged every kind of person involved in colonial expansion to collect and document botanical specimens. As aspects of Kew Gardens living collections no longer exist in their countries of origin, he also considers the emotional resonance of how these specimens are now witnesses to these latent histories of erasure, particularly of indigenous knowledges. A key residency consideration in this presentation was the necessity of being able to share research at various stages of development with peers in order to have moments of output and feedback that could help make sense of the various fragments.

In the final presentation of the morning, Yazid shared his insights into the kinds of approaches that have and have not worked in terms of hosting artists in Palestine. In a rather methodical and clear overview, Yazid outlined the reasons why shorter-term, time-bound and production-focused residencies need to be thoughtfully reconsidered in

order to mitigate short-sighted, opportunistic representations of Palestine in the art world. He identified key points of contention that include the issue of political tourism, whereby artists tend to gravitate to key sites of political significance in a manner that encourages a 'one directional way of interacting with the landscape.' These tendencies are often based on preconceived ideas that set aside local questions and thoughtful interactions with communities. The question of local context is probed further to consider what it means for artists to be situated in city centres and disconnected from other locales, as well as the tendency of artists to gravitate to the neoliberal comforts and amenities. All these factors play into larger questions about power and representation when artists, who operate within this framework, go on to make work for international art events as experts. One of the ways that the foundation has re-configured their artist residency programme is to make them longer term, iterative commitments over the course of four years that include visits and fieldwork, engagement with local partners, as well as a publication of interim research and an exhibition.

Following the presentations there was a Q&A and four pre-selected focus groups organised around a series of themes. These included 'Imbalances' moderated by Christine Takegny, 'New Residencies', moderated by Salma Tuqan, 'Dialogue with Historic Collections', moderated by Ilaria Puri Purini and 'Historic Collections' moderated by Priyesh Mistry. After which each group moderator then shared a summary of key themes that arose during these discussions. As the seminar notetaker, as well as a fellow in residence at Delfina, I participated in the focus group on imbalances, and thus my observations, are likely to reflect the experience of this particular group more than the others, creating a slight imbalance in this report as well.

One of key insights about the increasing prevalence of institutions hosting residencies is how difficult it can be to create a flexible structure for artists within the rigid infrastructure of an institution. The creative process demands a degree of agency, access and flexibility that may not coalesce easily in the often corporate, bureaucratic and insular structure of institutions. There is a fundamental incompatibility in trying to accommodate a more free-flowing, flexible structure to one that is old and rigid. Hence, there is something performative about hosting a residency, because it demonstrates outwardly a degree of dynamism that simply does not exist in practice.

Against this backdrop, what often happens is that there is an instrumentalisation of artists, particularly through institutional diversity mandates. Institutions can enthusiastically go out and recruit artists from different underrepresented groups as a kind of virtue signalling, for instance. Yet the existing infrastructure may not have the capacity to hold that artist, and the recruitment in a sense happens prematurely – before proper support systems are thought through. There is a learning that needs to happen on the side of the institution, but the residency is initiated as a reaction to external pressures to be more diverse and inclusive without creating the consciousness and the support systems that are needed to genuinely accomplish this.

As a result of these constraints, what happens in practice is that the artist finds that they

quickly need to learn how to navigate the institutional bureaucracy while balancing this with their own artistic integrity. The host, too, finds that they need to be a broker or mediator between the artist and the institution, which they may be underprepared for. Working with artists requires you to find ways around rules, permissibility and access. On both sides, the experience can therefore be very taxing.

In thinking of future strategies for organising residencies, one suggestion that emerged was to prioritise residencies that are non-production focused so that “a natural germination of an artist’s work can happen.” The thinking here is that an institution doesn’t need to claim the output of an artist, but rather provide that artist with a new context for their practice to evolve and grow. Of course, transactional thinking around residencies can go both ways as there are sometimes expectations on the side of artists that their work will be acquired by the host institution. The other unspoken expectation raised by one participant is that the artist will donate what they produce for free.

Some of the implicit or sometimes confused expectations on the side of institutions and artists can lead to situations that can be exploitative and it is important to consider what goes unsaid or what causes discomfort as opportunities for learning how to shape residencies in ways that are more generative and nurturing. Other areas of exploration in the discussions looked at the possibility of viewing residencies as ongoing relationships rather than time-bound, momentary extractive ones; the hesitancy of giving access and handling of historic collections to people who are not staff; the need for greater support for visiting artists in logistical matters, like living expenses and materials.

Mandy Merzaban is a London-based artist, researcher and writer with a practice at the intersection of interdisciplinary art making and empathic listening. Through intersectional feminist thinking, she considers the power dynamics that shape and conform the interpretation of artists and arts labour within dominant arts institutions. She is the 2022 Brooks International Fellow in Tate’s Research and Interpretation departments and a fellow in residence at Delfina Foundation. Using ethnography, poetry and artistic intervention, her current research at Tate inspects the institutional conditions and forces that shape the nature of anti-racist activities within museums.