

A photograph of a group of people walking on a city street. The image is overlaid with a dark semi-transparent rectangle that contains the title and author information. The people are walking from left to right. In the foreground, a woman in a light blue and white striped shirt and blue jeans is walking. Behind her, a man in a yellow and green patterned shirt is walking. To the right, a man in a blue t-shirt and khaki pants is walking. The background shows a brick building and a yellow taxi cab.

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# Brief Reflections on Artist Residencies in Community Contexts

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## **In recent years, the participation of artists in community change efforts has become more prevalent through growing numbers involved in social practice, public practice, tactical urbanism, and Creative Placemaking.**

While there is growing documentation and discourse about the types of projects pursued, less attention has been paid to the structures and mechanisms that help enable artists to participate in communities and make contributions. Artist residencies in which host organizations provide artists with time, space and other supports to work in-community, are critically important mechanisms. Offered primarily through arts-focused organizations, but increasingly through other types of entities as well (e.g. transportation and planning departments in local governments; community based social service and development organizations), artist residencies can take various forms—long-term

continuous residencies where artists are embedded in a community for months and, to the extent possible, become neighbors with others living there; long-term episodic residencies where artists visit a community for short periods repeatedly over a long span of time; short-term residencies where artists are in place for a few days or a week or two, among other temporal arrangements. Sometimes artists come in with a clear idea about a project to pursue; other times, artists are responsive to the context and circumstances of a community and devise their work in conjunction with the host organization, residents, and other community stakeholders. Budgets for residencies range widely,

as does the degree to which a host organization shapes the artists' experience and work.

CONSUMPTION, the project conceived by artist Rick Lowe and adapted and executed by artists Aletheia Hyun-Jin Shin and Emily Chow Bluck, through an Asian Arts Initiative (AAI) residency, 2013-2015, is described in detail in other writings in this collection, so I will not repeat that here. Rather, drawing from my observation of that residency at various junctures—high and low—as well as many years of examining the roles of artists and arts organizations in communities, particularly in economically challenged neighborhoods, and also from working closely with arts service entities that offer and promote residencies in communities I offer some reflections and considerations in designing and executing future artist residencies in community settings.

### **AN INTERROGATED PRACTICE: WHAT'S NOT NEGOTIABLE?**

Ultimately, a successful residency relies on clarity about what is and is not negotiable for the host and

for artist(s). Despite the well-intentioned inclination to be flexible and adaptive, and often a resistance to claim patterns of behavior, hard boundaries, established policies or rules, seasoned organizations (hosts) as well as artists typically have developed an often un-articulated set of premises that characterizes their practices. Interrogation of practice and articulation of those values and premises that are essential—not negotiable—in one's practice is key.

“Not negotiables” may include fundamental values about how a visiting artist enters a community, the role of the artist(s) in relation to community and benefits accrued to community as a result of the work, beliefs about time required for various stages of work, about how financial resources should be managed and/or shared (or not) with collaborators, requirements about resources and materials for a project, and authorship, among other considerations. Reflecting on the AAI residency and other residencies in community contexts, the exercise of interrogating practice and extracting and articulating what is essential and perhaps even not negotiable as an

initial step when considering a possible collaboration would be extremely helpful. The identification of conditions that are essential, or not negotiable, is not intended to create unwelcome constraints or a straitjacket. In fact, the intention is the opposite—to create the best environment for the work to flourish.

### A “COURTING” OR “TRIAL” PERIOD?

Prior to committing to a residency, particularly one that is long-term and relies on the host entity to carry out work when the artist in residence is not on-site, as was the case with CONSUMPTION, artists and host organizations may want to consider intentionally creating something akin to a courting or trial period prior to the residency. In that period, all parties involved have the opportunity to experiment, discuss with candor and truly explore how they align and diverge. It is also an opportunity for a reality check about organizational capacity, community context and all parties’ concurrent commitments that may impact the work.

During a “courting” period, it would be important to establish clarity about values and an understanding, with actual examples, of how each party enacts those values. For example, both parties may state that they value transparent, collaborative relationships with residents and other community stakeholders. But specifically, how does each party typically go about creating relationship? What is the basis for and frequency of contact? What constitutes transparency in a relationship? What are methods and patterns of communication? What does collaboration actually look like for each party? How much time and resources does collaboration require? How has each party established and carried out collaborations in the past including distribution of resources and division of labor? What challenges have they faced in previous experiences?

When a host entity is longstanding and has history in a community, relationships with other longstanding entities are likely to be complex. Clarity about that the host’s history and any complexities in relationship to other local players implicated in the proposed work is crucial. How



Rick Lowe, Aletheia Shin, Emily Chow Bluck, and men of the Overcomers group at Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission

does a host’s standing in a community facilitate and/or impede artists’ work during a residency? Is the alteration of relationships an intention of the residency? How should the host’s possibly complex relationship to other community stakeholders be approached within the course of the residency?

Clarity about the typical intensity and rhythms of the artists’ work and the host entity’s capacity to support that is also crucial to understand. What mindset and level of commitment does the artists’ practice require? At the beginning of CONSUMPTION, the transformation of social relationships and physical space on Pearl Street, as Rick envisioned it, required

an unwavering commitment and ritual-like daily practice of cleaning the street, not as a chore, but as a passion—a practice that initially proved difficult to execute given the structure of the residency, with Rick not on-site every day, AAI’s limited organizational capacity, staff’s pre-existing relationship to the space, and the demanding physical condition and the social dynamics of Pearl Street itself.

### A THIRD PARTY MEDIATOR?

Even with a “courting” period, once a residency is underway, there will likely be bumps--challenging periods where there may be disagreements, unexpected circumstances that have

to be addressed, necessary changes to an existing plan. To help navigate this, an informed neutral third party may be helpful. The third party can offer a safe space for all involved to vent frustrations, help provide perspective and brainstorm ways of overcoming difficulties. A third party may also be helpful in negotiating the terms of the residency and related agreements at the outset.

#### FUNDER FIT?

While it may be tempting to seek or accept funding from any well-intentioned, credible interested party, considering the culture and fit of funders involved in the work is key. Because residencies can often involve complex dynamics and creative processes that are sometimes not completely predictable, it is important to cultivate a culture of flexibility and tolerance for adjustment with funders involved in the enterprise. Is the funder experienced in working with artists and creative processes? What is the funders' tolerance for modifications? What is the best reporting and communications practice to ensure that the funder can be as supportive as possible?

#### CONCLUSION

It was a true privilege to observe and reflect on what turned out to be an extraordinary, deeply meaningful effort that challenged and benefitted all involved—Asian Arts Initiative as host, Rick as the lead artist in residence, Aletheia and Emily as the artists that ultimately took day-to-day responsibilities for executing the project, the staff and participants at Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission as well as other community stakeholders. More than ever, as the intentional integration of artists in community change processes gains traction, figuring out the most effective structures to enable meaningful contributions is key. These initial thoughts about the structure and characteristics of artist residencies in community contexts is a small contribution to a topic that warrants further reflection and purposeful experimentation.

Major support for CONSUMPTION: A project on Pearl Street has been provided by The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage.



Support for the catalog documentation of this project has been provided by the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation.

Additional support for the Pearl Street Project has been provided by ArtPlace America, the Educational Foundation of America, the Samuel S. Fels Fund, and the William Penn Foundation.

