Put Evaluation into Practice

The Collaborative Residency Life Cycle

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Put Evaluation into Practice:
The Collaborative Residency Life Cycle

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Abstract

A residency is a conceptual space that typically sits within the physical space and networks of an organisation. The residency itself is intangible, yet exists through a structure of time, discussion, thought, action and proclamation. The residency provides space for creative practitioners to develop ideas within a supported environment, outside of their usual context. It enables immersion within different culture, exploration of practice with new people and a safe space to take risks. Practiced worldwide, the residency has become an invaluable resource for artists and the development of new work - but is its potential much greater? As producing organisations, can we work together to connect our individual residency spaces? Can we use this connection to increase value to artists and the development of art? Can we offer a more diverse cultural contribution? Can we open up our practice to new audiences? And in this unpredictable, global financial climate, can we offer greater stability by combining (often limited) resources?

These were the leading questions that we posed ourselves five years ago. What happens if we go back to these outcomes and use them as a format for evaluating existing collaborative projects and testing and setting up new collaborative residencies? In this paper we will present the background, development and outcomes of our previous experience with collaborative residencies. At the same time we will focus on what we have termed the Collaborative Residency Life Cycle, a model that can serve as a means to start thinking and developing new collaborative residencies. At ISEA2018 we aim to test the model with the audience and existing labs and individual artists/practitioners in Durban as well as the wider region of South Africa.

Keywords

Artist residency, conceptual space, transnational, collaboration, human-to-human network, trust, producing organization, shared resources, evaluation,

Introduction

In 2010, Netherlands Media Arts Institute (NIMk) led the set-up of three transnational collaborative artists in residence programmes. The first, Naked on Pluto, was collaboratively produced between Baltan Laboratories (Eindhoven, the Netherlands), NIMk (Amsterdam, the Netherlands), and Piksel (Bergen, Norway). The second,

We Are Forests, was similarly produced between NIMk, 5 Days Off festival (Amsterdam, the Netherlands), Pervasive Media Studio (Bristol, United Kingdom) and Kitchen Budapest (Budapest, Hungary). During the third, two projects, Narrative Navigation and You Are The Protocol, were produced between NIMk and Vivo ARTE.MOV in São Paulo (Brasil). Each programme was unique in structure, but each worked across countries and cultures, to support research and development of new artistic ideas. Each was initiated by NIMk, but were produced and developed with mutual responsibility and equal sharing of the workload. This article sets out to share key learning from these programmes, with an aim to inform design of future schemes and reflect on the potential of the residency space. The evaluation that follows is based on these three collaborative international residencies.

What Is a Residency?

The residency should be continually re-imagined, but inherent shared characteristics within the projects that we produced were:

- Time and space for artist(s) to reside at each lab to research and develop a new work
- A modest artist fee
- Production budget (including support of travel and accommodation)
- Regularly scheduled conceptual and technical critiques with lab communities
- Online documentation of project process
- Testing opportunities
- Public presentation of research

In terms of structure, the projects were developed within different time frames, from an intense three-month period, to a number of short sprints. For each set-up, the needs of the artists, the nature of the project and the flexibility of the budget was taken into consideration. It's important to determine a clear definition of the expected outcomes of the residency. Residencies often focus on the production of a new work or commission. However, a focus on research and development can be extremely valuable. R&D frames the residency as a safe lab-style space for taking risks on new ideas. This brings a wider scope for experimentation that significantly benefits future practice and production. It

also gives rise to new forms of collaboration, creation and cooperative culture. Since completing these programmes, the project teams have discussed possible formats beyond artists, 'idea in residence'. These could include curators, researchers or producers in residence, or wider staff exchanges.

What Is the Added Value of Collaborative, Shared Residencies?

Collaborative residency programmes, particularly those that are transnational, hold increased value for both participating artists and producing organisations. For artists, shared residencies offer a context that's more than simply time and space to work. By residing at each partner organisation, time and space is multiplied across locations; and each location brings it's own culture to the work. Whether through working methods, language, conceptual interpretations or other cultural factors, a place and time can significantly influence thinking and deepen complexity of a work. For organisations, shared residencies mean shared resources. This multiplies the offer to the artist and distributes workload in terms of administration and organisation. We also found that it allows stronger relationships to form between organisations and individual producers working within them. In our experience, this encouraged valuable knowledge sharing in terms of working practices; and the formation of new transnational opportunities, collaboration and cultural capital.

Evaluation Points

When evaluating the individual projects and comparing them to each other we decided to focus on several key learning points which we defined as: 1) Focus; 2) Preparation, Planning & Duration; 3) Communication. These three areas shared common characteristics between the residencies and could also be used to bring to light more general issues.

Focus

The focus in all three residencies was very different, from working towards a presentation within a pre-set exhibition theme, to a research period, and creating an interactive project for a mobile situation. Although this difference in focus was not anticipated beforehand, it proved beneficial because it meant that different strategies could be experimented with: in terms of content, collaboration with multiple organisations in various countries, and choosing various working methods (single projects, collaborative projects).

Preparation, Planning & Duration

The structure and timing of the development period was built around the first proposals that were accepted. Nevertheless we felt with each residency that time was always too short, but it also became clear that each residence very much required its own planning and structure, because people work in different ways, have varying skills, and need various ways of guidance or assistance from the organisation, all of which can shift during the period of the residence. It is only during the process of the residency that the needs and necessities of resident artists and their project become clear. This was clearly reflected with the second case study, the project We Are Forests (a communal sound walk by Duncan Speakman and Emily Grenier). Early in the development of the residency structure, the partners had intended the outcome to be a finalised piece, exhibited during an exhibition or festival. However, as we were looking to commission an experimental work, emphasis was shifted to R&D. We still wanted to work with a festival, and the Amsterdam-based festival 5 Days Off were keen to provide support for the artists to test ideas at the festival during the development period. However, rather than using it as a platform to exhibit a final work, we all felt the creation of a lab-type space within a festival, was a much more useful and valuable approach.

The attitude of *going with the flow* is even more important in cases where people who don't know each other beforehand are asked to work together, or if the artists are in the early stages of their career and are less experienced. The latter is in some ways an advantage for the organisation, because it is easier to keep track of the working process. This is often more distanced in the case of more experienced artists who are more likely to take decisions on their own. For example, with the Naked on Pluto (a Facebook game by Dave Griffiths, Aymeric Mansoux and Marloes de Valk) residence, the planned duration of the residency was initially set to three months, but since the artists came from different countries and time planning was an issue, it was decided to extend this to a six-month residency period during which half of the time was actual working time. Furthermore, due to time and availability constraints it was decided to make a set up of 'sprints': During a period of one week the artists would visit one of the media labs and work together on the development of the project. The sprints turned out to be very productive, especially for the artists since it gave them a very intense time together to work things out.

"The sprint format really suited this project. There were parts of it that required the three of us to be together physically, to get our heads together for intense sessions of brainstorming, scriptwriting, game-world design and concept development. The sprints provided us with the time, space and focus to accomplish this. Other parts of the project required more isolation and longer stretches of individual work, such as the implementation of the interface design, writing the server and client-side code, and writing the texts for the game. Those parts were done remotely, with a bug tracker, a Wiki, and lots of video calls to sync our actions. Besides the creative and productive benefits of this format, there are also practical issues to consider. None of us could have left our home for months

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on end, for example. We have families and other work obligations to consider. This way we could collaborate over a long period of time (six months), with a big distance between us (1500 km) on a project that otherwise would have been impossible to realise.” Marloes de Valk[1].

The format of week-long sprints was perhaps not the most ideal for the media labs, as it gave them little time to engage with the project or with the artists since they were always extremely busy (of course) with the project. A period of at least two weeks would have been more beneficial. However, with the third case study, Narrative Navigation and You Are The Protocol, we concluded that an even longer residence period was required. In this case the cultural differences between the countries, the Netherlands and Brazil, as well as the different level of experience and expertise of the two artists necessitated a longer period of adjusting, conceptualising and developing the projects.

It was agreed by all resident artists that working between different labs and countries was extremely beneficial. The change of environment, visiting the different labs with their different backgrounds and contexts, also proved very beneficial for the artists. They liked the new environments and each one provided them with new energy and inspiration.

“What's important to me in these residencies that you've set up is that they give us more focus. The presence of a physical location and an opportunity to meet different people who are doing other things, to meet, talk, discuss and possibly exchange is very important. For example, the act of having to give presentations during the residency, which at first might seem annoying, is actually very beneficial. It forces you to explain what you're doing, to reflect on the things that have been in your head, or that have come up between the three of us, and to make some sense of it again.” Dave Griffiths.[2]

Nevertheless, the spread between different countries, and different working environments, create a number of major shifts for artists. To enable artists to fully prepare and manage other work commitments, a substantial lead-in time is recommended. The intensity of the residency period and the wish to concentrate on the project during this time leaves little headspace for other projects. Being physically separate from the usual working environment was a further contributing factor. One way of dealing with this is to build breaks into the residency period. Breaks make it possible to catch up with other work commitments, and provide time for distance and reflection. If the artists do not know the labs beforehand, it would be useful to provide information and context about them in the lead-up to the residency. This could be provided by the labs/producers and by previous artists in residence, who could describe the lab environment from an artist's point of view.

Planning a return visit to the initial lab where the residency started proved also to be a good idea: a final meeting/presentation at the first lab closes the residency cycle, and gives the first lab the opportunity to experience the final results of the residency (taking into account that the initial research can be very different to the final output).

Communication

Communication and knowledge transfer inside an organisation is important, but can be less frequent than meetings with producers/artists and between producers of the different organisations. However organisational meetings with artists is recommended, as it strengthens connections, opens unforeseen exchanges and builds confidence.

Although there are cost implications, regular face-to-face meetings between all producers/labs and artists are beneficial not only to the artists, but also to the producers/labs. Face-to-face meetings allow producers to better understand the working methods of the other labs and stay more closely in touch with project development. Although process could be followed on the online project journal and blog, and tools such as Skype were utilised, we found face-to-face meetings could not be replaced. They strengthen our relationships and significantly increased opportunities for future collaboration.

Common Issues

During the evaluation process of the projects we distinguished several common issues that we believe can be generalised to other (kinds of) collaborative residences:

Trust

While it is important for the artists to understand the roles and the context of the different labs involved, it is also important for the labs to understand the working methods of the artists. Within previous (transnational) residencies it has proven an advantage if at least one of the labs are familiar with the resident artist(s). This raises questions of openness: whilst open calls create a 'way in' for artists outside of the labs networks and equally provides an opportunity for the labs to discover interesting work that was not previously on their radars, solicited applications are often a reality.

Trust between labs and the artist(s), and the labs themselves, is an essential commodity.

Collaborations are built on:
- The quality and profile of labs
- How their offer contributes to the collaboration
- How they compliment partner labs

However, the success or failure of collaboration often depends on the people within them.
Finding producers and collaborators with a can-do attitude, an open approach and an ability to learn from failure is imperative.

Documentation & Reflection

It is crucial the residency is documented throughout. Sharing process and findings as the work is developed, allows others to easily follow the project and comment where useful. Documenting the journey also facilitates valuable reflection and evaluation at the end of the residency. During We Are Forests, the artists regularly updated an online project journal that was shared on partner sites; the labs also created short videos interviews and recorded the final presentation in Bristol, http://www.dshed.net/we-are-forests. In the case of Naked on Pluto, as described above, the artists maintained a very extensive project blog that was updated regularly throughout the process and continues to be a rich source of information and reflection on the issues raised in the artwork, http://pluto.kuri.mu.

It is essential to build in moments for discussion and reflection. During each residency we organised presentations, workshops and test sessions, some of which were scheduled from the outset, some of which were ad hoc in response to the needs of the project. For example, Baltan Laboratories organised a play testing session during the Naked on Pluto sprint in Eindhoven with a group of Game Design students from the Fontys University of Applied Sciences and the Technical University Eindhoven.

"This resulted in a lot of valuable feedback on interface and game mechanics, and a mountain of new bug reports. This session was followed by several one-on-one play-tests that focused more on the individual game experience and narrative."
David Griffiths, Aymeric Mansoux and Marloes de Valk[3].

As part of We Are Forests, a final presentation took place within each residency block in each location (Bristol, Amsterdam, Budapest). The presentations were open to potential audience, other artists and those with expertise relevant to artists' practice. In Brazil, the artists were able to test different stages of "Narrative Navigation" in previously defined places where the actions could take place, considering different zones in the city with lack of digital art accessibility. Amongst the selected areas, three of them hosted Labmovel activities during the residency: public square in Freguesia do Ó, Public Library Mario de Andrade and Centro Cultural São Paulo.

As part of the third case study we conducted a thorough analysis of the impact of documentation methods that were used during the development process of the residences. For all the residences we used a blog to document the development. For Naked on Pluto a special technical blog was created which described the technical development, key decision points and the programming code that was used. One of the pitfalls of a standard blog is that the structure influences the outcome of the documentation, for example it is chronological, always showing the last post that is created. Another difficulty was setting the goal(s) of the blog: the audience you're writing for influences what you will be writing. Although all the artists were open to sharing their experiences during the process, it quickly became apparent that there are very different ways to document a process. Some artists preferred to use video statements, others captured the development in photography, some used informal and personal narrative techniques, again someone else would focus on technical steps that were made. Furthermore, the information on a blog is very contextual but the content can be accessed, copied and shared by anyone as soon as a post is published. It happened a few times that information or interviews were posted on other websites without reference or information that would explain the views expressed.

Next to an evaluation of the content and use of the blogs, with the third residence we compared the documentation strategy with documentation methods that are being developed for the restoration and preservation of contemporary art. Rather than only serving the purpose of reconstruction, these models prove to be flexible and therefore open to different usages, creating an interesting point of departure to experiment and analyse the documentation of artistic working processes. The main focus of these models is doing interviews with the artists during the whole process at set times and around specific issues. The documentation models proved to be valuable guides for posing questions and addressing specific issues. The interviews clearly showed the changes in the artists' thinking and their decision-making processes. A more in-depth analysis could provide other artists, developers, researchers and organisers with interesting insights and useful information regarding creative and artistic working processes.

Ongoing Questions

Should the role of the labs be defined within the residency? In both cases, the role of 'facilitating making and thinking' was present at each location. However each lab had a unique emphasis, drawn from the expertise within their communities. It's therefore important to define not necessarily the role of the labs, but the specialist qualities of each lab and what their communities offer. This enables artists to efficiently plan and maximise project development at each location.

o How can we best keep each other updated about process and facilitate communication between labs? We have continuing discussions on this point. Online tools were utilised frequently throughout the residency, but as previously mentioned, the importance of face-to-face meetings should not be underestimated.

o Is there a necessity to match-make and support networking of artists? This is important and as individual labs we often provide this 'service' within our constituencies. However, there is a

great opportunity to escalate this by facilitating cross-lab networking.

Key Findings: The Collaborative Residency Life Cycle

The life cycle of a collaborative residency begins before commencing the development period and continues for a short while afterwards. From the experience of producing the different projects, we recommend considering the following:

Before

- Build the collaboration: identify partners with complimentary values yet unique offers, who advocate open, collaborative approaches;
- Consider western and non-western ways of working and producing residencies;
- Research phase: Select an artist who also advocates an open, collaborative approach. Engage in subsequent discussions regarding the project and possible needs and begin sourcing collaborators etc.;
- Manage expectations: it's important to get this right from the outset and get it right with everyone involved, including artists, labs, partners, collaborators etc.;
- Define the scope, resources, goals and identify the adjustable variables;
- Identify the opportunities to work with and learn from partner organisations and where possible, build these opportunities into the programme from the outset;
- Is the residency an exchange or not? Ensure everyone has a shared understanding and attitude.

During

- Encourage curiosity through regular critiques and (in terms of technology augmented projects) testing of the work;
- Maximise the relation to local context;
- Residencies contribute to making the lab into what it is - consider how to keep traces of that and share it;
- Be aware of the everyday life dimension of the residency - the human, informal dimension - it's essential;
- Flexibility can be an issue, find a cohesive way to accommodate it;
- Get deep into other partners ways of working;
- Document and share the process throughout.

Afterwards

- When does the residency end? Bring it to a celebratory close;
- Disseminate the 'story' (public and other) and present work-in-progress;
- Share key learning;
- Consider how to continue fostering relationships between host and artists; and between project partners. Also consider how to continue the exchange of knowledge;
- Consider how to measure the outcome qualitatively and quantitatively;
- Consider how to support the work beyond the residency period: is there scope for touring? Or informal advice you can offer on opportunities such as project grants, or other residencies the artists could access, to further develop the work.

The potential impact of the transnational collaborative residency is great. It makes space for ideas and reflections that would not otherwise be possible. It creates focus, accelerates project development and exposes process. As producing organisations, we've found that we *can* work together to connect place and space, link our networks, and share resources and knowledge. Through this cooperation, we *have* multiplied support for artists, offered diverse cultural contributions, archived process and increased our engagement with audiences worldwide. And in the present, unpredictable, global financial climate, we believe this model *does* offer increased stability for artists and participating organisations, and unlocks potential that we simply hadn't imagined when we began.

Conclusion & Open Call

In this paper we propose a practical approach for collaborative artists-in-residence formats based on shared interests and exchange between different organisations. Our approach was based inside existing cultural lab settings in which people and their local knowledge and expertise were key decisive factors for the development process of the project. Such a practice largely depends on human-to-human networks that can sustain and bring into view alternative possibilities. Our aim with this open call is to further expand and test this model in different settings. Having experience in different countries and regions, from large metropoles such as Sao Paolo (Brasil), to small towns such as Bergen (Norway), and vibrant capitals such as Amsterdam (the Netherlands) and Budapest (Hungary), we believe that er can scale collaborative artist-in-residence to various needs and possibilities. We will follow up our paper presentation with an informal gathering where we will actively invite local communities and independent artists/practitioners to evaluate local cultural case studies and discuss potential collaborations. Before and while being in Durban we will connect with organizations such as Art Space Durban, The Maker Space and others. We are particularly interested in exchanging ideas about formats of collaboration and the value and challenges that derives from them.

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Author(s) Biography(ies)

Annette Wolfsberger (NL/AT) is an independent producer and researcher. Currently she is Project Coordinator of Re-Imagine Europe, a collaborative international commissioning and audience development project with an aim to respond to the social and political challenges. She worked as senior producer for Sonic Acts (2008-2017), contributing to and realising international commissioning and research projects such as Dark Ecology (NO/RU), Kontraste (AT) and the internationally touring Vertical Cinema project. Previously, she worked as project manager for European cultural workers' exchange programmes for Trans Europe Halles (EU), programme manager for Virtueel Platform (NL) and co-ordinator of the international artist residency pro-gramme at Netherlands Media Arts Institute. She has a background in political science, cultural policy and African languages, and contributed to publications on new media policy and practice.

Annet Dekker (NL) is an independent curator and researcher. Currently she is Assistant Professor at the University of Amster-dam: Archival and Information Studies, and Visiting Professor and co-director of the Center for the Study of the Networked Image (CSNI) at London South Bank University. She worked as Re-searcher Digital Preservation at Tate; core tutor at Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam; fellow at Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam; and head of exhibitions at Netherlands Media Art Institute, Am-sterdam. She publishes widely on issues of digital art and preser-vation, and has edited several publications, among others, *Lost and Living (in) Archives* (2017), *Speculative Scenarios, or what will happen to digital art in the (near) future* (2013), and *Archive 2020: Sustainable Archiving of Born Digital Cultural Content* (2010). Her monograph *Collecting and Conserving Net Art* will be published by Routledge, Spring 2018.