

Setting the record straight: Towards a more nuanced conversation on residencies and capital

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This article was first published online by ArteEast for the 'Residencies' edition of ArteZine, guest edited by Aaron Cezar of Delfina Foundation.



rooftop of a random building in Algiers

Over the course of the last fifteen years or so, I have had the fortune of being engaged with various artist residency programs as a founder, director, juror, board member and donor. These residencies have taken on a variety of forms: from retreats to exchanges; site-specific, studio-based, workshop and community-based efforts; formats which focus on production and training; initiatives focused on a group or an individual;

regionally specific and international in scope; formal and informal artist-run spaces, as well as official state-run bodies; and sometimes initiatives with a diplomatic scope. In my view, residencies remain essentially about experimentation, research and learning regardless of their mission, purpose or nature.

The intrinsic development of residency programs and the plethora of models that have evolved since

the early twentieth century in many ways mirrors the expansion of contemporary artistic practice and the spheres that art has progressively occupied in society over the last hundred years or so. This is true not only in relation to formal and aesthetic matters but also in relation to overall historic, political and philosophical developments. The expansion of the realm of art from a fine arts-based practice to one that spills into and borrows from the spheres of the humanities and the social sciences is reflected in the development of new models of residencies that are more critical, discursive and ideological. These are no longer simply based on patronage, as they have historically been, but more on a relatively new concept and reality of the independent artist, the community of practice, and a societal intellectual zeitgeist. As art became more engaged with other fields and its mandate was increasingly popularized, other sectors in society recognized the developmental, creative, civic and critical attributes of the arts. Developments in artist residencies from, say, patron initiated painting studios to artist-run colonies or science and commerce based research programs, did not take place in a vacuum but rather happened in tandem with specific ideological, political, and governance contexts and historical moments mostly in Europe and North America where these residencies flourished. A closer look at the emergence of various residency models and their characteristics might help better illustrate the above. What follows is a more general picture of the progression and development of residencies, rather than a linear and straightforward history.

The earliest form of modern artist residencies in the late 19th century were set up by patrons who offered artists studio space as guests on their estates as a form of philanthropy. In many instances these patrons commissioned residents to produce new work for them. The power dynamic here was clear and quite simplistic. The artist was a mere executer in a hierarchical class-based commodity exchange arrangement.

It is not surprising that with the development of radical artistic thought in the early 20th century and massive movements globally to redefine class-based societies and the place of the individual within new forms of governance, such as a highly appealing communist ideology for many intellectuals and artists, we began

to witness the development of artist-run residencies and utopian art colonies. These tended to be less about exchange value and more about collective production, the creation of a bohemian community and the avant-garde. Such initiatives were often self-funded and supported by artists and individuals who had access to family wealth but who were against the values of the bourgeoisie. Eventually, the emergence of social democracies and the belief in the moral principles of the welfare state allowed for the development of institution-based and government funded residencies. The philosophical notions attached to them were, for instance, that art and culture should be made accessible to all and the belief that artists had special visionary and illuminating qualities within modern societies. As such, these initiatives created studio facilities for both permanent and temporary residents and various institutions began to establish fellowships for artists in educational settings and public agencies. Government public institutions, universities, factories, and hospitals, for example, funded most of these programs; and when feasible, professional development and access to facilities and equipment were also provided to artists. New types of residencies emerged in the 1960s that were based around retreats, communities, and collective endeavor. These, often small-scale initiatives, were supported and founded by groups of artists and patrons or private art foundations. Soon after, residencies for social engagement were being created with a strong focus on public interaction, societal issues, education and community building. These have tended to attract support from municipalities, government agencies, community-based organizations, development bodies, social justice foundations, and arts and culture philanthropies. In more recent decades, new residencies have focused on new productions and exhibitions which in turn have offered opportunities for financial bodies, cities and governments to brand themselves and for galleries and other commercial agents to exploit for greater financial gain and media attention. Arts organizations and museums have also launched residency programs as a way to expand their curatorial ethos but also as extensions of their education and outreach programs. Funding for these programs tends to draw from government bodies, foundations,

corporations, and dealers. The last residency model that I will mention in this over-simplified taxonomy are programs where artists take on the role of travelers, witnesses, ambassadors and purveyors of national/cultural identity. These programs tend to be funded by government agencies, national cultural centers, foreign ministries and foundations not only for the sake of the artists' professional development but also as tools for cultural diplomacy and the improvement of understanding and dialogue between nations and regions. There is no doubt the sheer number and diversity of residency models that exist in Europe and North America has greatly expanded the realm of possibilities and opportunities for artists. Today, artist-run and retreat-like residencies where artists are given the space and time to reflect and work are scarce. Had new social, political, commercial and scientific-influenced models not emerged and without leadership from stakeholders (aside from patrons and artists) who have invested in the residency process, artists would have even fewer residency opportunities today. The view over the long haul demonstrates that there have never been more residencies globally than there is today. More and more artists are participating in various residency models than ever before including those from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). There is a general perception by artists and arts professionals in the global south, and more specifically in the MENA region, that residency opportunities and funding for them is dwindling while at the same time becoming more prescriptive and conditional. Too often the criticism is that the funding available for residency programs in the region tends to have a rigid and sometimes even dubious agenda. Whether this may or may not be the case, I would rather argue that these funders have strategies and missions that are in many ways tied to the sources and the origin of the funds they need to dispose of and, as such, seek to accomplish specific goals and outcomes which, in turn, are interpreted as non-responsive to the needs and desires of the arts community.

So what are the roots of this perception that has led to a great deal of frustration and debate by the art community in the MENA region? What are its causes and how can we help alleviate it? There is no doubt that in their dealing with European and international

donors and partners, the arts community in the MENA region has experienced significant imbalance in power dynamics, inequity in partnerships and exchanges, and a top down approach to collaborations and cultural development that are perhaps imbued with historic prejudices and knowledge gaps. Although many in both the South and the North have recently been calling for a reevaluation of this relationship and demanding an urgent new road map to improve this dynamic, the problem lies elsewhere. The lack of a properly developed cultural ecology, the limited funding available for civil society and the vast discrepancies in democratic forms of governance, legal frameworks and almost non-existent local philanthropy, lie at the crux of the matter. The vast majority of funding available for arts and culture in the MENA comes from outside the region. By far the largest segment of these funds is from foreign governments and more specifically, ministries of foreign affairs and diplomatic agencies. There are only a handful of foreign foundations in arts and culture are active in MENA region and their scope of activity is limited. The array of possible residency models above demonstrates that each has specific sources of funding to fulfill a different need and purpose. Whether a residency program provides unlimited time and space for artists to do their work in retreat-like conditions or whether artists are sent for residencies to foreign countries as cultural ambassadors means that each model will have particular and divergent rules of engagement, motivations, expectations, outcomes and methods of evaluation.

The historical changes over the last year in the MENA region tie existing and new sources of foreign funding to democratic transition and political participation which could mean even more prescriptive funding for the growing sector of arts and culture in the MENA region. The same could be true about residency programs in the West that will seek out artists from the region as a means to educate and inform their audiences about the changes taking place on the Southern coast of the Mediterranean. After all this is understandable given the priority for many Western-based arts institutions who seek to address issues of importance to their societies. As such, they are likely to be engaged in developmental initiatives and models of support in the MENA region

but are unlikely to be excessively engaged in the growth of a local arts and culture sector purely for its intrinsic qualities and self evident benefits. That work is indeed for us to do in the South! Arts and culture institutions in the MENA that are focused on developing artists' practices and capacities through residency programs in the region need to seek and help develop alternative sources of funding from both regional and international individual donors and institutional philanthropies. This will give flexibility and independence from compromising their artistic, political and aesthetic visions. The recent growth in philanthropic endeavors in the region and a belief that local funds are needed to tackle sensitive societal, political and cultural priorities indicates that the time is ripe to pursue the development of diverse local resources for our sector. Arts institutions (specifically those with an interest in residency programs) and culture professionals in the MENA region can no longer afford to be passive observers or boisterous critics of the funding dynamics impacting their universe. They must realize that in order to alter the current state of affairs, they need to re-envision their programs, build infrastructure, develop capacities, and lead policies that will allow for a more nuanced, home-grown and holistic development of their ecology.

About the writer:

Moukhtar Kocache was Program Officer at the Ford Foundation until January 2012. Born in Lebanon and raised in France, he lived for almost fifteen years in the USA before joining the Foundation in 2004 and moving from New York to Cairo. He works on the development and sustainability of arts and cultural spaces, networks, and service infrastructure. His grant-making supports small to mid-sized organizations and focuses on creativity, discourse, arts education and cultural development in Egypt, occupied Palestine and Lebanon with some programming in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Moukhtar also programs and manages a cluster of grants that support alternative and emerging media platforms and media reform agendas, as well as a cluster of grants that support the development of local philanthropy in the MENA region. From 1998 to 2004, he was Director of Programs and Services at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, a leading arts council in the USA where he ran residencies, public art programs, exhibitions, festivals and support services to artists and arts organizations. He has undergraduate and graduate degrees in political science, art history and nonprofit management. A trained and practicing arts manager and curator, he has lectured and taught at museums, universities and nonprofit venues internationally. His current interests include the sustainability of independent creative platforms, cultural and social justice philanthropy, political philosophy and policy, film as a medium of self-representation, and the stuff that falls through the cracks.