

UK Report: Artist Networking Events



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Introduction

This report focuses on the work undertaken by the UK team to involve artists and arts organisations in all aspects of the Residency programme.

The distinction between artist and community in the context of the Residency project is a difficult one. We welcomed the fact that in Staffordshire artists are very much part of the make up of local communities, and for this reason we also wanted artists to engage in the residency project as local citizens-acknowledging (like many other workers) they could bring a number of different perspectives on civic engagement to the table. Organisations such as B- Arts, Airspace, the British Ceramics Biennial, are all good examples of how the artists and community work together in North Staffordshire.

However, early conversations with people working in the arts revealed that they often felt the artists voice was seldom heard in the context of socially engaged community arts work, and it was this which we wanted to address in the context of Residency.

The Process

We endeavoured to involve artists at all stages in the project. For us this meant that artists should be involved:

1. To help define and structure the Residency, including suggesting how and where artist opportunities should be targeted.
2. To advise on how they would want to work with residency artists and associates from other countries
3. To participate in study trips, events and seminars
4. To support any visiting artists to North Staffordshire
5. To request resources which would help them in their work and to contribute to the toolkit resources.

We initially communicated with the arts organisations and artists whom Staffordshire University had an existing relationship with- primarily through their engagement in the MA in Community and Participatory Arts, delivered by the University. This initial scoping exercise focused on why and how artists would like to get involved.

We used this feedback to design our strategy for artist network events. The key recommendations were:

1. To host events alongside existing networking opportunities as time (particularly unpaid time) was limited for artists
2. To host events in different venues and at times of day to maximise who and how artists can contribute.
3. To recognise the contribution of all people working the creative industries- including workshop leaders, administrators, project managers and tradespeople.
4. To maximise opportunities for networking, learning new skills and finding out more about working in a European context.

West Midlands Participatory Arts Forum (WMPAF) Event, Birches Valley, Cannock Chase Forest, Staffordshire, Wednesday 30th July, 9.30 – 4.00pm.

We initially met with West Midlands Participatory Arts and Health Forum at a regular meeting on 15th May at Friction Arts. The network event was hosted as an activity, which formed part of a longer day exploring opportunities for artists to work outdoors. The full programme of the event is available as appendices along with a contact list for everyone who attended the day.

The workshop was attended by 10 people, but the wider group of attendees participated in contributing towards the discussion topics through participatory activities led by the residency team, We Are Frilly and the Cultural Sisters.

The discussion topics were:

1. What role do you think residencies can play for community artists?
2. What requirements would you want a Residency to have in order to participate in it?
3. What should the UK Residency take into consideration in terms of supporting an artist?
4. What information about residencies would help you in your work?

The process we used included:

- Creating simple images and statements using photography
- Producing Origami birds and wishes
- Group activities creating statements on bunting
- Group discussion

The findings were (answers correlate to the statements above)

1. The role of Residencies

They offer an opportunity for a longer period of employment (and payment)

A chance to get to know people and have the conversations which can help ensure projects are designed for and with communities
Offer a sense of status and role for the artist (which is sometimes difficult to obtain in relation to community arts work)
A chance to experiment and fail- both in terms of approach and creative choices
Time available to build partnerships and make the most of community assets

2. Requirements

Supervision- ranging from guidance, friendship to formal management.
Fitting into a team and being made to feel part of the community and the delivery team.
Understanding the roles of everyone involved and knowing where and who to ask for resources, ideas or advice.
A wide time frame between applying and starting the residency (in order to plan other work around it)
Flexibility within the Residency to continue other work commitments
A realistic work schedule
Opportunities for people with additional needs, caring responsibilities to participate.
An exit strategy and/ or ways to keep involved in the future

3. The UK Residency

Understanding how the arts scene works in the UK- where funding comes from, the role of the arts council, etc.
Information and introductions to other people and artists working in the creative industries (such as WMPAF)
An opportunity to showcase your work from your home country
Clear guidance on how to live in the UK- where to get resources from, manage a budget, etc.
Attend local arts events and community functions

4. What would help?

Case studies showcasing community arts work from a European perspective
Testaments from artists about their experiences of undertaking a residency
Practical resources and links to help understand civic engagement
Ideas for how to tender for civic engagement work or projects

Be Reflective Launch Event and Residency Artist Network Workshop, 1-3pm, 27 January 2015, Flaxman Foyer, Staffordshire University

The second artist network meeting took place at Staffordshire University. It was delivered in collaboration with the Cultural Sisters and West Midlands Arts, Health and Wellbeing Network. It was advertised to WMPAF participants from the previous network meeting and it was hosted in the North of the region. We had a prior connection with WMAHW as they had supported Residency from the onset and we had used their network of 2500 to inform people about the residency project and to invite people to get involved.

The co delivers are significant because Cultural Sisters had initially considered hosting the Residency project and WMPAF was part of the CIC who hosted the community practitioner for the UK Residency.

The workshop was attended by 30 people and during the course of the workshop participants heard a presentation about residency and then engaged in a textile activity producing bunting and discussing (and sewing!) their views about the toolkit and reflection activities.

The discussion topics were

1. What information about residencies would help you in your work?
2. What role does reflection play in your work?
3. How does reflection help artists working in civic engagement?
4. What resources would you like to see in the toolkit?

The findings were (answers correlate to the questions above):

1. Information about Residencies

Examples of the different sorts of residencies, which can be undertaken in a civic engagement context.

Information about people with different needs have participated in a residency.

Information about the perspective of partners and communities undertaking civic engagement residencies.

Practical information about how residencies have been delivered around Europe.

Information from an artist perspective- including information written or produced directly from the artist.

Hearing about Residencies from a participant perspective- what they enjoyed/ didn't enjoy, what difference did it make, etc.

How to evaluate a Residency (with limited funds) and create evidence which will be respected and used?

2. Role of reflection

Helps assess why I am doing the work- especially when times are hard.
Keeps me focused and helps me manage my work and time.

Gives me an outlet to express myself- often there is no-one to talk to or share experiences with.

It helps me to improve my practice- both with people but also creatively
Develops an evidence base for what I have done and achieved- it can be hard to explain to people what you do and this helps.

Helps me to focus on the creative element of the work- I spend a lot of time during projects dealing with practicalities and bureaucracies.

Helps me organise my thoughts and ideas- and those of that I hear in the course of my work. This can feel overwhelming and challenging and reflection gives me space to think about what I have heard.

It creates a narrative- which in the middle of a busy work period can be hard to make sense of. I like looking back on my reflection and seeing how the story of the project developed.

3. Reflection and Civic Engagement

Helps to assess the extent to which you feel you are making a difference.
An outlet for frustrations- both in terms of civic engagement outcomes but also personal and creative frustrations.

A useful tool to explore issues associated with participation and review strategies to improve how I work.

It helps with collaboration- I reflect using sketches and images and I can then take these back to the people I am working with.

It is a two-way process- I encourage participants to reflect. Sometimes this is for evaluation but generally it is because I am curious about their experiences. People often feel very empowered simply by asking them about their views on the process. It is easy to forget this.

Stops me from using jargon- it helps me create a more authentic voice for the work I do with communities

4. Resources

Link to Be Reflective materials

Examples of European approaches to reflection

Ideas for how you can schedule and find time for reflection activities

Evidence that reflection was used in the context of the Residency project

True stories- including challenges and bad days, written from an artist perspective

Quick and easy advice for working with civic engagement- it needs to be easy to use and access.

Additional Consultation

Our artist engagement was not just confined to the formal meetings. We also used opportunities such as the study visits, Residency Meetings and local arts events and meet ups to discuss the residency project with local artists.

In addition, some of our work to scope and involve excluded communities also engaged with artists such as the Live Age event, Langton Women's group and their collaboration with the British Ceramics Biennial and the University of the Third Age.

Feedback from these events included:

- ⇒ Keeping artists in the community up to date with information about residency and the opportunities for Artists.
- ⇒ Creating opportunities to meet artists working in civic engagement from other countries- to talk about experiences but also to see what work they have done.
- ⇒ To have examples of templates available for resources which might help artists working in civic engagement. Ideas included press releases, risk assessments, safeguarding guidance.
- ⇒ Opportunities to continue the communication after the formal events or meet ups.
- ⇒ Offering opportunities to attend and participate in study visits and the final seminar.
- ⇒ Gathering information about how to define civic engagement and signpost towards best practice (UK artists reported that increasingly sources for this sort of information are limited).
- ⇒ Create a chance to socialise and have fun with artists and communities from other countries- don't have a fixed agenda but lots of time to talk, make friends, eat together and take part in collective activities.
- ⇒ Learning more about civic engagement in other countries