

UNPACKING RESIDENCIES:
SITUATING THE PRODUCTION OF
CULTURAL RELATIONS

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ART RESIDENCIES

PERFORMING THE MARGINS

Mariska van den Berg

Artist-in-residence programmes are often perceived as being located in the margins of the contemporary art system, as they provide a temporary living space and a place to work away from the everyday life of the artist and the professional arena. However, within the art-ecology as a whole, they serve as a key node for the production of artistic work and are co-constituting an ongoing dynamic of centring and peripheralizing. The peripherality of art residencies should, I will argue, not so much be attributed to their locale, but rather to the aspiration of residencies to probe marginality as a concept. It is this potentiality that provides the possibility of adhering to institutional frameworks and at the same time withdrawing from the current models, by creating very specific conditions for art production, often with minimal means and in unexpected places.

In this article, I will explore Jan Verwoert's notion of 'performing the margins' as it takes shape through art residencies. I will connect Verwoert's concept of 'I Can't' as a form of agency in relation to Anthony Huberman's text on the manners in which alternative spaces embrace different behaviour or modes of work in order to foster artistic practices.¹ Both Verwoert and Huberman demonstrate that on the level of the individual artist as well as on that of (small) institutions there is a sense of urgency to develop new practices of working and relating to one another. In 2007, Verwoert signalled the need for artists to establish new modes of working within our current social climate — an antidote to our so-called high-performance culture in which work becomes a continuous performing. A few years after, continuing in Verwoert's line of thought, Anthony Huberman observed a pivotal change in the functioning of small art organizations in relation to their larger institutional counterparts. Both authors introduce the notion of 'care' as an antidote against consumerism, automatism or indifference in institutionalized art practices. Both come up with examples of artist practices or organizations whose marginal position is key to what their contribution is in terms of work. Verwoert and Huberman each point to similar features — the development of new modes of working, new manners of presenting and the exploration of new forms of institutional models; all of which, I would argue, are the same features that are often attributed to artist-in-residence programs. As such, in this article, I explore these features as they surface in two case studies. In doing so, I will point attention to the manner in which the functioning and relevance of art residencies correlate with their position in the margins.²

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Jan Verwoert, 'Exhaustion and Exuberance. Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform', *Dot Dot Dot* 15 (2007), pp. 89–112; Anthony Huberman, 'Take Care', in: Mai Abu El, Dahab, Binna Choi and Emily Pethic (eds), *Circular Facts*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011, pp. 9–17.

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This essay is based on two studies that together comprise an inventory of eight international residency programs, in and outside the Netherlands. I have interviewed artists who recently worked in art residencies—including Isabel Cordeiro (Hospitalfield, Scotland), Lard Buurman (TIP, Beijing) and Gijs Assmann (Zin, the Netherlands)—as well as Bas van den Hurk, one of the artists running Leo XIII in Tilburg, the Netherlands; curator Maaike Gouwenberg of Deltaworkers in New Orleans; and Laura Simpson, programme manager at Hospitalfield. See also footnote 8 and 9.

The 'I can't' as a form of agency

Art critic Jan Verwoert reflects in his often-cited essay 'Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform' (2007) upon the current permeation of high-performance consumer culture in the art world. Internalizing the post-industrial condition in the Western world, he writes, we have entered into "a culture where we no longer just work, we perform".³ In a high-performance culture, all parameters for the work are set by an outside demand, the job must be done as fast as possible to meet the deadline, while the 'I Can' motto is pushing incessantly to go along with the pressure to be ever ready to deliver. It is evident that although this high-performance ideology matches poorly with the nature of the artistic process, it undeniably is affecting all professional art practices. It is a major influence on art, funding and policies; it requires entrepreneurship, quantifiable output, visibility, and is incorporating corresponding ideas about success. And whether we like it or not, as long as we do perform, we continue to develop ideas, to provide content, and to produce the social and intellectual capital enforcing the ideology of high performance. To counter this development, Verwoert poses the question: "Do we have a choice?"⁴

Considering the collective exhaustion and precarity that the arts sector has fallen prey to, going along is hardly an option anymore, he argues. But its inversion, a negative affirmation, is eventually nothing more than going along with another predefined option. Instead, Verwoert proposes to categorically refuse the forceful imposition of any label and he suggests an alternative route, that of opening up space for other options. Verwoert probes how this space could take shape by asking "How can we embrace the I Can't without depriving ourselves of our potential to act? Could we unlock the I Can't as a form of agency?"⁵ He takes inspiration from the *Anti-Happenings*, performed by the Slovakian artist Július Koller in both public and private spaces mid-1960s: a series of small interruptive acts, provoking situations in which the potential for difference becomes tangible; it was here that the possibility of other possibilities was found.⁶ By doing so, Koller, in the words of Verwoert, "turned his work from a marginal practice into a practice of performing the margins" a performance of demarcating the limits of the existing society by pointing beyond them towards other possibilities.⁷

Extrapolating this approach to art residencies, one could argue that these spaces provide amazing (temporary) buffers against what Verwoert signals as the 'pressure to perform':⁸ Many programmes do not expect a predefined outcome or impose deadlines, in order to enable the residents to withdraw from the pressure and expectations.⁹ Even more important even when investigating the role and significance of art residencies is Verwoert's question "How can we embrace the

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Jan Verwoert, op. cit. (note 1), p. 90.

⁴
Ibid., p. 91.

⁵
Ibid., p. 92.

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Ibid., p. 94, 97.

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Ibid., p. 93.

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See Mariska van den Berg, 'Performing the Margins', a text written on the invitation of AiR Platform NL — DutchCulture | TransArtists and BKKC (Knowledge Centre for Art and Culture in Brabant) for the *Working the Margins* symposium held on 29 March 2018, pp. 2, 3. For more info, go to <https://www.transartists.org/article/working-margins-artist-residence-programs-today>

⁹
Ibid., p. 6; Youri Appelo, Mariska van den Berg, 'On Impact and Value', an exploratory study of the impact and value of small artists' organizations with an artist-in-residence program in small and medium-sized cities in the Netherlands, initiated by Dutch Culture | Trans Artists, performed by for Platform BK (PBK), March 2017.

I Can't without depriving ourselves of our potential to act?".¹⁰ In his example of the Anti-Happenings, it was Koller's marginal position, boycotted by the political regime, that gave his works significance in particular in relation to the context. Likewise, in this article, I will argue that in the case of art residencies their potential to 'perform the margins' closely colludes with the relational dynamics of the art eco-system which they are submerged in. However, art residencies' strive to question existing paths and explore what other ways might entail, meaningful as it is, does not operate in a vacuum and in order to be able to work at all a number of basic financial and organizational circumstances have to be met. As two artistic directors of prominent Dutch residency programs have recently decided to resign due to an ongoing excessive workload and large financial and consequently structural uncertainties, Verwoert's call for an artistic practice to counter the high-performance culture in the art world remains uncomfortably up-to-date.

To take care

In 'Take Care', curator Anthony Huberman's essay on how small art organisations 'behave' differently to their larger institutional counterparts, he signals how, in recent years, small actors around the world have been taking risks with developing modes of work and their behaviour as an institution, and by doing so have created a meaningful context for proposing alternatives today.¹¹ Huberman argues that the historical role played by alternative spaces became somewhat superfluous when commercial spaces and large museums also began showing uncommercial work by uncommercial artists. As a result, small art organizations were faced with "the challenge [...] to behave differently" in order to be discernible from larger institutions.¹² Huberman describes this as an attentional shift from *what* is done to *how* it is done, addressing in his essay small art organizations involved in experiments with new institutional and curatorial methods, initiatives that question accepted logic and structures governing the art world, and alternative spaces propagating new ethics of behaviour or codes of conduct. What surfaces for Huberman is an alternative curatorial approach that embraces a more vulnerable relationship to knowledge and the audience, one that is not entangled in a binary opposition of either overtly didactic or anti-intellectual, but one that encompasses what he proposes as the 'I Care'. This affectively-oriented curatorial approach joins both the spirit of Jan Verwoert's call and the experimenting smaller art organizations: "allowing learning to replace teaching, camaraderie to replace competition, and the homage to replace the explanation".¹³

Similar to Verwoert's example of Koller, the position of these organizations in the larger whole plays a crucial role in Huberman's argument as he implicitly situates them in a dynamic relationship with the larger institutions. Within this relatedness their marginal position is not only manifested as responsive and complementary to the mainstream but also as taking a reflective and critical 'meta-position' towards it — a position that only can

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Jan Verwoert, op. cit. (note 1), p. 92.

¹¹

Anthony Huberman, 'Take Care', Circular Facts, (eds.) Mai Abu ElDahab, Binna Choi, Emily Pethic, 2011.

¹²

Ibid., p. 2.

¹³

Ibid., p. 5.

be taken from a certain distance and detachment; a marginal position.

In every interview I conducted with regards to my research into art residencies, both artists and curators strongly emphasized the necessity of developing different modes of working — as well as ethics of behaviour and codes of conduct — and the crucial role that residencies play in the development of these modes.¹⁴ It's the peripheral position of art residencies and their specific relationship to 'the center' that I wish to explore and probe in two case studies, taking Verwoert's suggestion of turning our work from a marginal practice into a practice of performing the margins as guidance.¹⁵

LEO XIII: questioning the conditions for artistic production

Leo XIII, a small-scale studio complex run by artists in Tilburg, has existed for over 20 years, more recently offering temporary residencies to artists as well. The residency programme focuses on: "[...] young artists who dedicate themselves to a 21st-century continuation of issues arising from the tradition of 20th-century avant-garde",¹⁶ with the avant-garde ideal forming the conceptual framework within which the possibility to (re)think things radically differently is probed and questions are addressed about the role and social engagement of canonical autonomous art forms today. Alongside its ateliers and guest studio, Leo XIII conducts a programme of discussions, debates and symposia, focused upon building a discourse with the perspective of the artist in its very centre. In 2017, for example, guest curator Daniela Apice invited Stella Lohaus, who has been running a renowned gallery in Belgium for decades, to debate the conditions "for more involved forms of presentation and representation of contemporary artists"¹⁷ This discussion, I posit, connects to a series of other discussions being held in recent times. For instance, in 2016, a group of curators in residency at Schloss Ringenberg explored current exhibition concepts and models focusing on the difference between the curatorial approach and the artist method. Two years prior to that, within the symposium, *A Guest Studio As a Sanctuary in a Neoliberal World*, the "ingredients for the art world to preserve its own dynamics and freedom" were reflected upon.¹⁸

In my opinion, precisely these kinds of debates, encounters, and the knowledge production resulting from it form the potential quality and meaning of a small residency program like this.¹⁹ With a program focussing strongly on the perspective (and needs) of artists, Leo XIII adopts the kind of meta-position analogous to the small art organizations Huberman wrote about, that were moving in response, complementarily and critically reflecting on the more institutionalized circuit. Forerunner Bas van den Hurk believes that the value of Leo XIII and similar places lies in safeguarding the realm of the invisible and facilitating the space of time and care; exactly the things that are so often lacking and that

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Ten interviews were held for the two consecutive research projects, see note 2, 8 and 9.

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Jan Verwoert, op. cit. (note 1), p. 93.

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Leo XIII, Tilburg, The Netherlands. For more information, go to <http://gastatelierleo13.nl>.

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Non-lecture #1, with Apice for Artists and Stella Lohaus. A conversation about current issues in the contemporary art scene, 7 January 2017, Accessed through: www.apiceforartists.com on 10 December 2018.

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The symposium followed upon the publication of Pascal Gielen's *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude* (2015), in which he argues that the globalized artworld is an ideal area for economic exploitation.

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It goes too far to go into detail of these separate programs, I refer to them to give an impression of the direction of the ongoing reflection on both artistic and curatorial practice as well as the institutional position of Leo XIII itself.

are under pressure in the larger societal context and in the arts as well. “Space, time and concentration precede and are conditional for public showing”, he argues: “Not everything can — and should — be made visible. Invisibility contributes to focus. This is the value of the kinds of places that we have to stand for”, Van den Hurk says. It is these circumstances under which the counterforce Verwoert calls for, could take shape: to eschew from saying either yes or no, to create one’s own standards and come up with something substantial answering those new standards instead of adhering to normative ones.²⁰

DELTAWORKERS: a site-specific immersion

Deltaworkers is a field research based residency program in New Orleans. Initiated in 2014 and run by curator Maaïke Gouwenberg and artist Joris Lindhout, Deltaworkers offers each year a temporary residency for artists to investigate and explore the south of the United States.²¹ Modeled after the Capacete residency model in Brazil, founded by Helmut Batista, Gouwenberg and Lindhout invite artists who in their ongoing practice show interest in the history, stories and identity of the region.²² The program has its base in New Orleans at the shared Camp Abundance — hosting artists, writers, and film-makers — and encourages its residents to work throughout the south.

The program offers communal living spaces, an assistant and an introduction into the extended network they build up over the past years — ranging from the University of Houston to Buddhist retreats in the swamps and the local lively grassroots art scenes. The philosophy is that the city itself becomes the resident’s studio; their approach, however, is cautious: “Our residents cannot just start producing right away, that would only bring clichés and superficiality, the city is far too complex”, says Gouwenberg; “an outsider doesn’t get in easily. We took time and continue to develop a network and make introductions. Often, work only arises (long) after the time spent here, and that is fine”. Residents are invited to give at least one public presentation contributing to a series of public events at the spot and other locations in the city, and on a regular basis, set up collaborations with local parties as well.

Deltaworkers creates a framework, weaves connections and most of all fosters a certain attitude towards the city, one of sensitivity to local particularities as well as an awareness of agency as embedded in an ongoing formation that all involved are part of. The program, therefore, stimulates exchange, in encounters that are fed by being consciously present, by looking very closely and precisely at, for example, the representation of less privileged people — performing an endoscopic gaze — reflecting upon our role on the ways they are conducted. ‘Site-specific practices’ are probed: precise and sensitive working methods carried out in dialogue and reciprocity; testifying to current concerns, arising in the field — right here, right now — eventually calling for a reconsideration of the essence of site-specificity now.

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Evidently, it takes courage to evade, or maybe even ignore, the kind of visibility policy makers and funding bodies demand as this in practice means mainly large(r) audiences and widespread recognition. In the current situation there is firm ground and need to enter into the discussion about visibility to enhance a shift of the focus to the quality of the discourse and actively propagate that.

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Deltaworkers New Orleans, USA. For more information, go to www.deltaworkers.org

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Capacete residency model, Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, Brazil. For more info, go to <http://capacete.org/about/?lang=en>. The Capacete residency approaches art within a political, social and cultural context and aims for collaborations within these contexts.

Substantiating hospitality & reciprocity

Verwoert's call to abolish the 'pressure to perform', and the notion of care that both Verwoert and Huberman put forth, resonate in Van den Hurk's (Leo XIII) appeal to protect time, concentration and invisibility. The notion of care prevails in both the relationships that individual artists initiate as well as the manners in which a programme establishes connections to its environment. Both Deltaworkers and Leo XIII operate in the margins, offering space to artists, although each in quite different ways. Deltaworkers aims to steadily establish a connection with New Orleans and the deep South and as such Deltaworkers' hospitality is strongly based in the specifics of the site, actively incorporating local histories and narratives, whereas Leo XIII's guest studio, in turn, primarily provides a safe haven from the institutional world. Yet, as Leo XIII's stance as a program is increasingly more critical towards generally accepted ways of working in the art world, the question becomes how future artists-in-residence will relate to that position. Within the ongoing reflection on the future course of Leo XIII, questions surrounding the concept of hospitality became central.

Amongst others, the philosopher Jacques Derrida has written extensively about the duality of hospitality. On the one hand, he observes, hospitality implies a power to host and hence involves claims to property, ownership and a form of self-identity. On the other hand, unconditional hospitality implies opening the doors for all guests, making everybody feel welcome and abolishing a sense of ownership, self-control or self-identity.²³ For art residencies, the question of hospitality is a reciprocal one, as it simultaneously relates to the political frameworks of the art world in which they sustain themselves, as well as to how they engage in relationships with residents. How can art residencies provide an open space for others to create whilst also taking a position in the margins? With Leo XIII that led to questions like: How do we practice hospitality? Are there boundaries to it? Can we even think of hospitality without addressing reciprocity? How does this relate to a kind of productivity we favour? And subsequently is it reasonable to demand something back from our guests and in what form? Ideally any request for a contribution in any form whatsoever — reciprocity — would have to be motivated by the nature and positioning of the program as a whole. The same could be argued for the choice of residents as well, as a 'good match' between resident and residency can fuel and sharpen the profile or expressiveness of the program in its entirety. At the same time, such conditions are paradoxical to the nature of hospitality, as they imply that the outcome of an artist's visit is preconceived by the residencies.

The duality of hospitality is not only questioned by residencies but is also expressed in the practices of the artists in the programme. In a broader context, Finnish curator Taru Elfving noted that in relation to the (international) hospitality art residencies provide for today, a certain form of reciprocity is desirable, something needs to be given back in return by the guest.²⁴ Elfving argues that as the self-evidence of international mobility

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Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, Stanford: University Press Stanford 2000, pp. 23–25, 55. Translated by Rachel Bowlby. Accessed through <http://users.clas.ufl.edu/burt/shipwreck/derrida-hospitality.pdf> on 10 December 2018.

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Taru Elfving, 'Residencies and Future Cosmopolitics', *Reframing the international #1*, Flanders Arts Institute, p. 19–27, November 2017.

and exchange is under pressure — such as Europe becoming more and more inaccessible for people outside — and also the environmentally harmful effects of flying can no longer be ignored, we cannot but ask: If you do, how? How to tackle reciprocity within a residency? Interestingly, Elfving considers a residency as a place and a time, but even more as an act. The act of critical positioning of the artist-in-residence, by asking (and acting upon) such questions as: “What do these engagements do? Who and what do they serve? Can they have any local impact or global effects beyond value production in the sphere of the international art world?”²⁵ And: “How do they foster transformative encounters between practices, people and places across diverse boundaries?”²⁶ The questions point towards a position that goes beyond the unilateral relations of the tourist or researcher, solely consuming experiences and excavating sources. So what could that entail? What does reciprocity mean for the respective roles of guest and host?

Where the temporary stay of the artists is concerned, Maaïke Gouwenberg of Deltaworkers is reacting critically to the idea of reciprocity: “Bringing something, instead of taking, doesn’t change the very nature of the unequal relationship”. Like Verwoert, Gouwenberg points out the need to free ourselves from the binary framework, neither ‘I Can’ or ‘I Can’t’, nor taking or bringing, but transcending these limited choices. Embracing this perspective gives way to look for reciprocity within the invisible encounters that the residency stimulates and to explore the nature of the relationships that are established. All the artists I interviewed expressed a strong awareness of the complexity of being a resident, the possible cultural differences, the need for dialogue in those unknown places and that the question of how to relate to these aspects forms the very core of what it means to be in residence, and can only be met with a learning attitude.²⁷

The issue of reciprocity is a legitimate one, it has been raised but not yet resolved. As on the level of the individual artists it seems best manifested as an interested attitude, fostering open encounters, I’d like to argue for a shift in thinking about where reciprocity could best be substantiated; a shift from the single focus on the relationship between the individual artist and the environment to — also — that between the residency program and its direct and wider environment. In the case of Deltaworkers, the long-term presence of its initiators results in an extensive network of long-term relationships on site, both in and outside the arts; the gathering of impressive knowledge of the beloved region; as well as the fostering of a working method that deserves to be considered seriously and enables researchers to get a finger on the pulse of art right now. Focused hospitality, careful working methods and relevant discourse can bring about forms of reciprocity that benefits the specific site as well as the professional scene.

Marginal, connected and ground-breaking
Art residencies might often be marginal in a geographical sense, remote from the centre, but they are not exactly positioned in opposition it, on the contrary.

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Ibid., p. 24

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Ibid., p. 19

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Mariska van den Berg, op. cit. (note 8), pp. 5, 7.

As artist-in-residence programs aim to support artists in their professional development, these programs are closely connected to the artist's functioning in the art world. In their diversity and versatility, it is precisely these relatively small players in the bigger infrastructures of the contemporary art world, that are invaluable sites for production and more. In correspondence with Anthony Huberman's *how*, Deltaworkers and Leo XIII provide valuable examples of the development of new modes of working and new institutional models, that will likely resonate in the larger context. Experimenting with alternative ways of making, presenting and relating, as well as the discourses build upon it, bring about critical reflection and knowledge production. Precisely from their specific peripheral position, these places prove to be of great value for ecology as a whole. Instead of at the bottom of the hierarchy, residencies might best be seen alongside other institutes, or maybe even as the beating heart of the entire art ecology. Because their concerns are current and poignant, as are the experimental ways of giving them shape, it is important for these practices to be able to continue to develop according to their own motives and conditions. This needs to be further appointed and described — first of all by the organizations themselves — in order to ensure their resonance in the larger whole of art and society.

Verwoert and Huberman called for counter-practices made productive though immanent motivations. It is in this light that we can conclude that art residencies occupy a unique position. Being integral parts of the larger ecology of the art world, they offer open and reflective spaces for the development of other methods of working as well as institutional models. It is exactly because these programmes function interacting with the larger whole — responsive, complementary, critical and actively creating other possibilities — that they achieve their potential for innovation. Performing the margins, in between the already defined contours of other institutes and modes, might be the only place to do so. It is an important (dis)position and it is also an ambiguous one in which counterbalance is offered to dominant views and values — by demarcating the limits, and being subject to its operational (funding) mechanism at the same time. Nowadays that is not without threat. A vital question is where the necessary societal support can be found, and maybe even more, where within the art ecology itself? Support for the position, for the work, and for the fundamental contribution of art residencies.

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