

A Necessary Shift in Perspective

Rationale

For artists, New York City is one of the most inspiring places to live, and also one of the toughest. Most artists cannot survive on their art alone, and must secure other sources of income. Finding affordable studio space—and time to use it—has become an almost insurmountable challenge, putting all artists in the position of evaluating existing resources, and imagining new ways in which they can live and work as artists while remaining in the city.

An essential yet vulnerable subset of the art community are the artists who hold positions at arts organizations. Now in its seventh year, Shift residency is the first to support this particular demographic of artists/arts-workers, who not only work for institutions as curators, fundraisers, residency managers, educators, writers, directors, and myriad other positions, but who also have an artistic practice independent of these roles.

Arts organizations rely on the dedication and resourcefulness of the artists who work for them, as well as their natural connection to the mission at hand. These artists do not think of their livelihood as just a day job—it is a passion and a responsibility, and as such demands high amounts of stamina and creativity, depleting the very emotional and physical resources needed to make art. The more conscientious and enthusiastic an artist is about organizational work, the more he or she places stress on his or her artistic career. Moreover many employers don't consider that their employees who are artists are straining to fill the demands of another consuming job: making art.

Shift residency gives arts-workers a chance to recharge their artistic practice and realign it with their commitment to advocating on behalf of the arts. The immersive, collective, intensive studio experience that starts off each session provides residents a chance to temporarily set aside their arts-worker hats in order to focus fully on an area of artistic development that has been perpetually postponed due to time and space constraints.

Structure

The residency is tailored to arts-workers' challenging schedules, binding commitments, and limited flexibility. Seven artists are selected through a

nomination process. The residency begins with an immersive studio intensive for three weeks in August, historically the “downtime” for most arts organizations. EFA Project Space is converted into a collective studio environment to which the artists are given twenty-four-hour access to set up shop and dive into new projects. During regularly scheduled critiques, residents break bread together and discuss their artistic progress and the challenges they face. The intensive concludes with an open house for colleagues and friends, and a final dinner where the artists share the realizations of the past few weeks and their plans for the year. The following year consists of regular monthly meetings, structured and hosted by the residents at places of their choosing. The residency year concludes with a weekend retreat, and final public presentations at EFA, detailing each individual’s experience over the past year.

The Residents

The inspiration to create this residency came from the awareness that artists/arts-workers work so hard to provide services for others, as well as put in hours on their own artistic practice, that they have little time to apply for residencies and take advantage of other resources that are out there. Believing that at least one opportunity should cut them some slack, Shift residency honors the accomplishments of artists/arts-workers by inviting them to be considered without going through a laborious application process. When requesting nominations, we seek candidates who have worked a minimum of five years at a cultural organization, and who have made a significant contribution (as assessed by the nominator) to the New York City arts community through this role.

The ideal candidate is a practicing artist who has a desire for greater focus and professional recognition, finding him or herself at a crossroads, unsure of how to push their art further—perhaps due to the constraints and commitments of a full-time job. Most importantly, Shiftresidents are individuals who would benefit from and contribute to a supportive, interactive peer community. Each session brings together a group of individuals from different backgrounds and career phases, working in a diverse array of media ranging from object-making to sound, video, performance, social practice and installation, who are willing to share their individual insights and skillsets with their new cohorts. The circumstances that connect this group set the stage for a unique environment of thoughtfulness and reciprocity.

The result of this shift in perspective is often transformative—a new understanding of each individual's own creative process while considering the question of how to realign and reinforce their multiple roles. As this project evolves, so shall the list of organizations represented in the Shift residency, further identifying the “demographic” of artists/arts-workers. We witness a community that starts to recognize its constituents, and an expanding group of alumni advocates. New bonds are built across organizations as artistic and organizational partnerships and collaborations emerge, inspiring a different kind of dialogue than had previously existed and bringing in new resources and opportunities for individuals and institutions alike.

Organizations that have been represented in this project include Abrons Art Center, Artists Alliance International, Bronx River Art Center, Bronx Museum, Children’s Museum, Eyebeam Center for Art + Technology, Flux Factory, FreeDimensional, Henry Street Settlement, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Museum of the City of New York, Museum of Modern Art, New York Foundation for the Arts, Residency Unlimited, Time Out NY, Triangle Art Association, Vera List Center for Art + Politics, and Wave Hill.

As an artist who has been an arts administrator for fourteen years, I conceived this project in response to an overlooked area of need. I have sat on many selections panels and board meetings over the years where I have heard a common opinion that artists who work for organizations are not serious about their own practice. This bias may not exist in the emerging artist community, but it remains pervasive at the top. I was fortunate to have the support of EFA to initiate this project as a pilot, to see what would happen if we brought a group of hardworking artist/arts-workers to a gallery-cum-shared studio in Midtown in August and told them, “We believe in you, now go make something fantastic.” The results have truly been beyond what I ever expected. The inspiration I have gotten from witnessing the transformation that takes place and engaging with this exceptional support network—termed by one alumni as the “residency of superheros”—has led to a momentous shift in my own artistic practice.

-Michelle Levy