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Art Workers of the World Unite: A studio residency for arts administrators

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by Abbe Schriber

The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Studio Residency for New York City Arts Workers



Beatrice Wolert, BOOM! from the Happy...Congrats...Best Wishes... series, 2010. Acrylic on shaped board, 5-1/4 x 9 x 9 inches. Courtesy of the Artist

Residencies and professional development opportunities for emerging artists, while not always the easiest to secure, are happily still a reliable presence in the cultural fabric of New York City—from “Swing Space” at the Lower Manhattan Community Council, to the Artist in Residence program at The Studio Museum in Harlem, to Artists in the Marketplace at the Bronx Museum. But rarely do those who make these opportunities possible, the arts administrators at the core of these institutions, get the chance to showcase their own work as visual artists. Enter the Elizabeth Foundation of the Arts (EFA) Studio Residency for New York City Arts Workers—a two-week residency intensive from August 14–29, which admitted eight diverse and accomplished arts professionals (administrators, registrars, curators, writers, etc.) who maintain an active artistic practice in addition to their day jobs. The participants, who were nominated for the residency, included Tova Carlin, Sean Carroll, Paul Clay, Chantel Foretich, Felicity Hogan, Sebastien Sanz de Santamaria, Amber Hawk Swanson, and Beatrice Wolert, all of whom work in New York arts organizations as varied as the New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA), CUE Art Foundation, Artists Alliance and Cuchifritos, and the New York City Opera. After years of realizing the visions of other artists, this residency gave participants the time, space, nurturing community and critical dialogue that allowed for serious, concentrated productivity. More than just the two weeks of being present in the studio space, the residency will span the next year, with monthly follow-up meetings and shared planning sessions.

The artists’ practices, as well as their approaches to the program, varied widely, encompassing painting, drawing, photography, video, installation and sculpture. Some took time off from work, while others came to the space in the evenings after working at their jobs during the day. As arts professionals who know full well how to navigate institutional resources, budgets and schedules, they were effective in mobilizing and publicizing events such as their studio viewing and reception. Many chose to continue work on pre-existing projects, taking advantage of the time and space allotted by the residency. CUE Foundation Program Director Beatrice Wolert continued to build on her practice of using cake-decorating bags and metal cake tips to explore notions of decoration, domesticity and masquerade. Arts educator Amber Hawk Swanson worked on durational endurance videos and performances based on

means to shift abruptly from cultural laborer to cultural producer. Aside from the fact that both are often underappreciated and underpaid, these two aspects of the art world's social and professional infrastructures are generally seen as very separate. In fact, artists and institutions are more interchangeable and fluid than the mythology of the art world would make it seem. Recently, a number of galleries and cultural organizations around New York have turned a curatorial eye towards the people bridging these gaps, much of the time their own employees. Curator Dan Cameron put together the tongue-in-cheek group exhibition "Employee of the Month" at Marianne Boesky Gallery this summer. Organized in conjunction with the Art Handlers' Olympics, it paid homage to the art handlers and gallery workers who help assemble exhibitions, and gave them exposure as artists in their own right. A month later, the small Chrystie Street gallery Art Since the Summer of '69 hosted an exhibition called "The Intern Show," which showed the artwork of arts interns/artists around the city, and acknowledged their diligent, often unpaid assistance.

Asked about this resurging interest in the work of those "behind the scenes," Beatrice Wolert, of the EFA residency, replied that it seemed symptomatic of a desire for community-building and a do-it-yourself attitude that has emerged, largely in response to the economic climate. This seems like an apt point, and important to note in a wider art community that can be a struggle to negotiate for both artists and arts workers even in a booming market. As such, the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Studio Residency Program for New York City Arts Workers is vital in providing the strong community and resources for those artists who straddle both art making and arts professionalism, proving that these do and always will deeply inform one another. The residency seems to aim at narrowing the perceived gap between pedagogical, pragmatic approaches to art and the creative process of art making. Even further, it formulates the participants' work in non-profits or institutions as artistic practices unto themselves.

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