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Dialogues Interviews Lenka Clayton, Artist and Founder of An Artist Residency in Motherhood (ARiM)



Lenka Clayton, *Walking Studio* (2001). Image courtesy of An Artist Residency in Motherhood (ARiM)

Overview

Dialogues interviews **Lenka Clayton**, artist and founder of **An Artist Residency in Motherhood (ARiM)**. In this interview we tell the story of how the artist's intimate experience became the starting point for the creation of a **self-directed, open-source artist residency** to empower and inspire **artist mothers** all over the world.

Lenka, what sparked the idea of An Artist Residency in Motherhood (ARiM) and how have you managed to turn it into an international gathering platform dedicated to artist mothers?

The idea came from my own experience of being the primary caregiver of my children, and trying to sustain my work as an artist at the same time. When I became a parent I experienced exclusion in many forms from my professional world. In response I founded An Artist Residency in Motherhood – a self-imposed framework that reimagined parenthood as a site for artistic exploration. I worked to reframe challenging circumstances – exhaustion, nap-length studio time, anxiety, invisibility, etc. – as materials with which to work instead of obstacles to be overcome. For 3 years I was the world's first artist-in-residence-in-motherhood, and during that time I made 32 new works.

People started to email me saying “I wish I could do a residency like this, how do I apply?” and that prompted the idea to make An Artist Residency in Motherhood a project that others could take part in. On Mother's Day 2016 I published ARiM as a free blueprint and tool kit for anyone to carry out themselves. I shared it in a single post on Facebook and that is the only marketing I ever did. It was amazing. In the first few weeks, around 40,000 people looked at the website, it was shared very widely by word of mouth. As soon as I released it into the world it basically self-generated. To date there are over 600 artists-in-residence in 46 states in the US, and 40 countries.

Artist mothers appear to be a rare find in the art world. Were you expecting this much of a success?

When I was first pregnant seven years ago, I would look up “being an artist and a mother” and found very little. I saw Mary Kelly's project Post Partum Document – made before I was born – and that was the major reference. It made me feel like it was impossible, there were so few artists who are visibly mothers as well. It was really isolating. Of course there are and have always been many artist-mothers in the art world, but it is often hidden. I have heard many women relate experiences of being told that it is best not to share that you have children if you want to be taken seriously as an artist. I deeply disagree with this and see it as a political act to work publicly as an artist and mother and to sustain a platform for others to do the same.

This reminds me of the residency kit, which you offer for free on ARiM. Everybody can create their own program. How did you come up with the idea?

I wanted to find a way that people could have a structure for their residency that was fixed enough to be useful, but flexible enough to fit anyone's circumstances. People who take part are not taking part in my project, but in their own self-defined residency that fits their life and situation. The residency, essentially, is a mental shift. A structure that allows one to look at everyday circumstances in a new way.

The residency kit is a questionnaire that, once filled in, becomes a bespoke structure and plan for your residency. There are also links to things like a manifesto that you can print and sign, personalized business cards, signs for your studio window, invitation letters to use to get grants, etc.

I find the kit to be an extremely interesting tool because it provides a structure to the idea of the residency program, but at the same time it is highly customizable.

Exactly. The big part of the residency is reminding people that whatever their circumstances are, they can still have their own agency. For example, I never curate exhibitions from work created by the residents because I don't want to be in a position where the residency is selecting some work as being seen, and other work not. People have to sign up to be in the residency, but you don't have to apply and wait for someone else to determine if it is right for you, or you are right for it. You get to make that call for yourself.

I would argue that this openness explains why you wrote that ARiM "is not a residency about motherhood, but made out of motherhood".

Yes, that is an important aspect of the residency. Motherhood is not a subject for most of the artists, simply a material, or a context that they are working from.

When I think about obstructions, I find that time is a particularly big obstruction in our everyday life nowadays and artists find themselves constantly struggling against it in their daily practice. The challenge gets even harder when you become a mother. What role did time play in your process of rethinking your own residency project?

When I launched the blueprint for the residency I had a one year old and a three year old. I had no time to do a huge marketing strategy. I just launched it and watched it make its way in the world. Lack of time was intensely frustrating but it also helped me find simplicity in an idea, and it taught me to be more efficient as well as trusting of my process as an artist.

Do you feel that anything has changed since you first started your own project in 2012?

Yes, so much has changed. It has dramatically changed. There are so many people working to make powerful changes for artists who have families. For example, The Sustainable Arts Foundation is an amazing Foundation in San Francisco that has grants to specifically support artist parents, as well as grants that enable artist residencies to become more family-friendly.

ARiM provides the opportunity to benefit from a grant too.

You describe the Red Thread initiative as an experimental grant structure.

It was the idea of an extraordinary friend, a writer, Amy Rosenthal. She had grown up kids and I had little kids and we were discussing how hard it was. On the spot, she offered me 999 USD to help me with whatever I needed to support my creative practice. The important thing was that once I was able to, I would pass that 999 USD not back to her but onto another woman who was an artist and a mother who needed it, who would then would do the same, indefinitely. We called it the Red Thread Grant. The special thing about The Red Thread is that each grant recipient also gets to be a grant-giver. You can be the recipient in a moment of need but as and when your situation changes, you can support someone else.

Through ARiM, you also offer a mentorship service to artist mothers.

What are other challenges you hear them struggling against more often?

Lack of time is definitely the major one. Another challenge is just accommodating the enormous shift that happens to you when you have kids. Everyone I work with had a practice before having kids and for many people that changes after the experience of having children. Part of it is simply reorganizing, but the major part is the huge shift at a personal level, both socially and professionally. A lot of my mentorship is supporting people to understand and move through that shift. Invisibility is also a big theme. Often people can't travel or work as much as before. The question of how to keep working and be part of the conversation comes up a lot.

Invisibility reminds me of something I read on the website of Mother in Arts – an Amsterdam-based residency which has been inspired by ARiM – where they clearly state that “motherhood can accompany a successful artistic practice”.

It is ridiculous that a woman should feel that she has to choose between having children and making art, but these messages are communicated to women all the time. It is sexist and untrue. I completely reject it. I made the residency so that people can publicly occupy and demonstrate a different way.

Lenka Clayton is an interdisciplinary artist, and trained documentary maker. In previous projects, she has searched for and photographed every person mentioned by name in a German newspaper; worked with artists who are blind to recreate Brancusi's Sculpture for the Blind from a spoken description; and reconstituted a lost museum from a sketch from an archive. She is the founder of An Artist Residency in Motherhood, a self-directed, open-source artist residency that takes place inside the homes and lives of artist/parents. There are over 600 participants in 40 countries. Recent exhibitions include Object Temporarily Removed (2017), at the The Fabric Workshop and Museum Philadelphia, Talking Pictures (2017) at The Metropolitan Museum of Art and ...circle through New York (2017) at the Guggenheim Museum. Clayton was artist-in-residence at Headlands Center for the Arts (2017) and The Fabric Workshop and Museum (2014–2017). She is debuting a new project at the 57th Carnegie International, opening October 2018.

<http://www.lenkaclayton.com/>

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