

## Academic Research | Jan 2018

# Embedded Aesthetics: Artist-in-Residencies as Sites of Discursive Struggle and Social Innovation



Work by Edmonton's City Hall first resident artist Jennie Vejt. Courtesy of Seismopolite

### Overview

Artist-in-residencies (AiR) exist in hundreds if not thousands of different configurations all over the world, in over 100 countries in every kind of arts discipline and are hosted and organized by many different kinds of organizations. They offer a wide range of opportunities and impose a diverse range of demands and obligations. **Dr Michael Lithgow** and **Dr Karen Wall's** interest in this paper lies in the operation of the AiR as an assemblage of values, expectations, materials, goals, practices and conventions that create, arrange and conduct desire within an institutional setting. Their findings suggest that a **time-limited residency may open space for new ideas, practices and voices, but may be limited as to any structural changes that might challenge neoliberal urbanism and existing socio-economic problems.**

Part of the difficulty is in evaluating the long term impact of productive friction in contrast to the many ways institutional legitimacy and authority will strive to reassert itself.

## Motivation for research

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We were interested in the role of culture in everyday life and also looking for new ways to think about the social implications of creative practice in contexts of neoliberal retreat by state/public agencies and institutions from support for arts and culture. Residencies are one facet of multiple strategies by both grassroots actors and underfunded cultural institutions to develop new partnerships and collaborations that extend to citizen involvement.

## Contributions to the field

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An original model for understanding both the ephemeral and lasting impacts of embedded residencies through creative disruption and reordering of institutional discourses and praxis. We are also bringing attention to an under researched region of western Canada that in important ways serves as a model for mid-sized industrial and post-industrial cities currently pursuing competitive economic agendas based in part on cultural and tourism initiatives and the growing importance of arts and culture in general to ongoing transformations of urban spaces.

## Key learnings

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The aesthetic interventions on the part of the artist in the present case reorganized contextual elements in a municipal City Clerk's office by creating opportunities for exchange in 'contact zones' where staff and members of the public would encounter the artist in different settings: at her assigned cubicle, in her arranged studio space, or at meetings or other public events. The exchanges were uncontrolled and led to different kinds of productive friction including a series of interpretive large-scale paintings exploring the relationships between municipal authority and the public, but more poignantly in the event of a round dance held at City Hall that brought aboriginal members of the public together with City staff, elected officials and various departments and branches of the municipal government, a use of space and resources that had no organizational justification or jurisdiction until the embedded AiR along with her indigenous collaborators made it happen. Productive frictions reflect the discovery of resources for new experiences, the creation of new experiences, and the making visible of previously obscured or invisible experiences. And they reflect unprecedented legitimacies for the use of resources in unanticipated ways.

**Dr Michael Lithgow** is Assistant Professor at Athabasca University (Canada). His research interests broadly focus on citizen participation in public culture.

**Dr Karen Wall** is Associate Professor at Athabasca University (Canada). Her research interests include aspects of travel, collective memory, migration, intercultural encounters, social change and, generally, modes of transformation or hybridity.

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