

Academic Research | Jan 2018

Old Furnace Artist Residency: Art is a Conjunction



Image courtesy of Seismopolite

Overview

Old Furnace Artist Residency is a long-term art social aesthetics project that weaves together social sculpture, relational aesthetics, intervention, gesture, performance, community art, and participation art to create a praxis of social justice and art. **Jon Henry** started the project back in 2013 and it not only hosts artists but publishes a quarterly zine and sponsors community programs like the regional CSArts initiative.

The underlying principles of the project are rooted in feminist and queer theories of activism that focus on enacting social, political, and economic liberation. OFAR has played a variety of roles in the community as facilitators against development of a new jail, offering after-school art classes, uplifting the artwork of southern queer artists, and supporting young/emerging artists.

Motivation for research

This research is based upon my daily practice of living and collaborating with community folks. As a young queer artist, I am especially aware of the various institutional restraints that traditional residency programs instill and foster. I am interested in how PLACE informs making and think it's critical that artists are aware of the residency spaces where they formulate work. As creative place-making becomes ever more popular, I think it's important to think critically about how these arts institutions factor into the community's development.

Based upon my experiences and research, I sought to enact my ideas, results, and dreams through the Old Furnace Artist Residency project. OFAR remains committed to not charging for any of its components like application fees, residencies fees, zines, programs, lectures, exhibitions, etc. Without these economic barriers, we've been able to collaborate with a diverse array of artists and activists.

Contribution to the field

My work focuses specifically on the affect of art residencies upon the surrounding community versus its affect on singular artists and their creative processes. It's unique because there are hardly any residencies that take on a specific social justice or queer focus. The residency model that I examine and enact doesn't focus on its spurring along the artist's careers or creative practice but using the artist as a catalyst to further along community goals of equity and liberation. OFAR's various layers, extensions, and activities like SLAG Mag, AFAR, CSArts, and offering free community meetings space is another unique model for arts organizations to foster equity.

Key learnings

OFAR has instilled a vision of what art organizations could be doing in their communities to foster equity and liberation. It's evident that such a model is needed and sustainable. The project is almost five years old and has hosted close to fifty artists, organized exhibitions, published multiple essays and zines, co-facilitated without a formal budget or staff.

Over this period, I think there has been a shift where residencies are no longer being seclusive bucolic studios just for creativity but opening themselves to more community involvement and awareness. There is still plenty of room for movement. I am also unsure how earnest this shift might be when considering the shifts of grant organizations.

I think an earnest and sustained engagement with community folks is needed from our arts organizations. Residencies play a unique roll in fostering creativity, owning spaces, and securing funding. I hope that residencies will continue to support programs, activities, and artists committed to social justice. The work and research has taught me that art isn't just a product, noun, or verb but a conjunction. It's a way to bring folks together, connect ideas and histories, and combine resources; art

residencies can act as a central nexus for such ways of being.

Jon Henry is an artist, academic and activist who seeks to develop new connections, visions, communities, and economies through my sculpture practice. He is particularly interested in space's social, relational, and communal forms. He promiscuously move between fields, practices, professions, and materials in pursuit of liberating visions, languages, and landscapes.

<http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/master201019/105/>

<http://thejonhenry.com>