2014 Summary of the Survey of Eco-Residencies within the Alliance of Artists Communities

Presented to the 2014 Alliance Conference in Charleston, South Carolina by Randall Koch.

First let me say I appreciate the opportunity to work with the Alliance to begin the process of surveying the practices of eco-residencies and sharing it with interested parties.

The Alliance is well read on the subject of eco residencies and a definitive paper is available through the Alliance website. Titled the *Convergence of Art and Science: Ecology and a Sense of Place*, the piece was written by Caitlin Strokosch in 2005. The essay is a field wide study worth visiting or revisiting for its intelligent analysis and deeper look at specific place-driven multi-disciplinary programs.

I want to thank the 20 organizations that participated in the survey. The survey was conducted by the Alliance as a way to continue chronicling the diverse methods of residencies, which provide time and space for a better understanding of our shared ecology. The motivation to collect this data is so there would be an easy reference for programs to see who was doing what, and to encourage dialogue among program staff- to share issues and problem solving as colleagues. This is only a beginning, but the need for that ongoing dialogue is clear.

I also want to acknowledge here the significant influence of the 2002 Alliance Conference humbly titled “The Future of Creativity.” The conference provided inspiration to engage in specific ecological partnerships and to passionately look into my own surrounding environment daily for my field of study.

In that conference we heard from a number of excellent presenters who challenged us all to re-envision the artist as a leader in our community: a member of the school board; a design professional; a problem solving resource for the community on a wide-range of subjects. Someone with a clear perception of phenomena, vulnerable and open to seeing, and willing to communicate what they see, whether that is observation is ambiguous or not. I believe a number of the programs that exist today grew out of that stimulating 2002 conference.

It is my goal in this report to share with you how residency programs have the ability to address the need for greater understanding of ecology in a unique manner. I will include a selection the survey results and look ahead to how this survey or another form of regular updates and dialogue may help others in the field address their own organization’s goals.
To begin I would like to point out that every residency program is place based, whether that is proclaimed and embraced in the mission or not. In creating a residency program, you have made a place where trust, comfort and challenge exist and you have welcomed someone in to help you fulfill your mission. Your place is a home in many ways, however temporary.

You know that simply because when you have a resident that does not fit, it feels like your family has been infiltrated and you want them to fit or leave. Similarly, if you have a fantastic resident, you embrace them and feel you will know them like family for the balance of your life.

I would like to have you consider the following definition as it may help to understand how the work of eco-residencies bears on the huge task of righting our changing planet moving forward.

Gary Snyder states in The Practice of the Wild
Our place is part of what we are. Yet even a “place” has a kind of fluidity: it passes through space and time. A place will have been grasslands, then conifers, then beech and elm. It will have been half riverbed, it will have been scratched and plowed by ice. And then it will be cultivated, paved, sprayed, dammed, graded, built up. But each is only for a while, and that will be just another line on the palimpsest. The whole earth is a great tablet holding the multiple overlaid new and ancient traces of the swirl of forces. Each place is its own place, forever (eventually) wild. A place on earth is a mosaic within larger mosaics—the land is all small places, all precise tiny realms replicating larger and smaller patterns.

What residents do, what they observe, what brings them wonder in one place, is relevant to others who have experienced that in their place. The local is universal. When we find the common thread that connects us all, it will come from “ a precise tiny realm, replicating larger and smaller patterns.”

Residencies offer the secure trusting environment capable of giving the resident the confidence to risk, get intimate and vulnerable to a place and this kind of experience may provide the context in which revelation and transformation can lead to unique observations and the kind of understanding that ecology requires.

Immediacy and intimacy with place also provides for the possibility of Wonder. As we look closer and get more in touch with a particular place, the more chance we open ourselves to seeing amazing details and moments. And wonder can provide the spiritual experience that accompanies or is required for a transformative perspective.
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David James Duncan in “God Laughs and Plays” states

Wonder is like grace, in that it’s not a condition we grasp: wonder grasps us. Philosophically speaking, wonder is crucial to finding knowledge yet has everything to do with ignorance. Only an admission of ignorance can open us to fresh knowing. Wonder is the experience of that admission; wonder is unknowing, experienced as pleasure.

The Survey
The survey that 20 of the 40 plus eco organizations responded to asked three questions:

A. Describe the three most important environmentally conscious practices and/or ecological considerations you undertake as part of your residency program.

B. Do you see these practices or considerations as reflecting and/or forwarding the mission of your residency? If so, how?

C. What environmentally conscious practices would you like to take on but are currently not doing? What are the obstacles stopping you from taking these actions?

Responses to questions A, B & C are available as bullet points on the Alliance website. I will limit my remarks to Question A.

First let me note that Responses indicate the environmentally-conscious practices and/or ecological considerations that are characteristic of the 20 organizations participating almost always include the daily routines and thoughtful practices that many of us have integrated into our lives: recycling, thoughtful use of materials, composting, growing gardens or sourcing food locally and understanding how to build facilities more responsibly so energy and water efficiency and power generation may work into building improvements and capital projects.

These “lifestyle” practices at the residency indicate to residents the overall attitude of the organization and that the experience at this program on a daily basis will reinforce ecological values. These are also practices I assume that many other residency programs integrate simply as common sense and cost effective measures.

Roughly half of the programs surveyed involve local non-profits and community groups as partners in identifying projects and delivering solutions through their residency program. These programs reflect a clear intention to address specific
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cconcerns through multi-disciplinary approaches and partnerships within the community. I will point out a few distinct examples:

Audrey Singer from McColl Center responded: The environmental program at McColl Center for Art & Innovation has four pillars that make up the framework for our program, which are art, science, education, and community. We try to equally focus on all four of the pillars for each environmental project we do. For art this means that all projects must elevate the space aesthetically and use superior craftsmanship and design; for science this means that all of our projects are remedial to the environment, and use sound science. We work to reduce our negative impact on the environment the best we can and always make sure to take long-term outlooks as well. To hit the education pillar we partner with local schools, universities, and civic and community groups. We understand that if we want to have lasting effects in people's actions and thoughts as well as in the physical objects and interventions that the artists create, we have to have buy-in from the community. We do not come into a community unless we are asked, and we make sure that we know the residents, and are acting with the community at large and not on the community.

Audrey continues… Although there is no one environmentally conscious practice, or one specific issue we tackle with our environmental program, the more important part is the method and framework we use to achieve ecologically based outcomes for their interventions.

This program summarizes elements in many other programs, an integration of many considerations, and a thoughtful intentional approach.

Ed Dadey at Art Farm brings an intentional approach to the farming experience for their residency:

The primary eco-practice/function at Art Farm is its labor intensive versus capital-intensive model of operation: its resources being the enthusiasm, exuberance, skills and ideals of the artists and writers in residence. The three main principles guiding their time and energy.
1) Live with purpose, dignity and full expression without eroding the resources by which our lives are enriched and depriving future generations of the variety of these natural benefits.
2) Discover alternative patterns of cooperation through diverse, (but not in opposition) activities that give a sense of cohesion and community in meeting human needs.
3) Perceiving work as meaningful and essential, not simply as a means for survival, in forming personal and communal identities through goodwill brought and insight returned when imagining different systems of intrinsic value & exchange.
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In this residency, fundamental change in perspective is sought through the experience of daily practice.

The balance of programs surveyed involved more of a reflective opportunity. Less intentional to specific solutions, a long-standing tradition of residency programs is to trust the resident to take responsibility for their time, be responsive to the place they are residing, and find their own path of response to the place. Because of the daily routines I mentioned earlier, the resident becomes oriented to the place and what happens there, and with enough opportunity to learn about and get involved with the environment of the residency, the response can be quite insightful.

Caroline Brooks from Sitka Center for Art and Ecology states that:

"Place" provides a foundation for our residency program and the area's ecological significance and sheer beauty encourages our residents to connect with these surroundings in a significant and profound manner. Residents have commented that being here removes life's distractions and provides a clarity that helps them redefine their perspective on their work and life.

The Ecological Reflections program at the Sitka Center is a 200 year-long project devoted to collecting place-based creative responses to the rich and varied landscapes in which Sitka is embedded. We invite each resident who chooses to participate to submit a response to one or more specific Reflections sites within these landscapes. These responses become part of a collective body of work in an online archive. The collection seeks to record shifting societal and cultural views of the environment, new ideas in art theory and technique, changes in the sites' physical appearance, and the artists' unique backgrounds and viewpoints. The Sitka Ecological Reflections program is part of a larger national program (Ecological Reflections) whose mission is “to bring the environmental sciences, arts, and humanities together in long-term attention to places and their cultural and moral meanings, as these places change over time and generations.”

Susan Schwartzenberg from Exploratorium / Bay Observatory shared that Our work is based in inquiry and place-based education, we consider our museum program akin to a field station where research is taking place on environmental monitoring and interpretation/visualization. We also are interested in practices that encourage people to decipher how human interests are embedded both in the built and natural environment. And there are programs that combine some specifics and some reflective qualities to their programs: Ann Brady describes how the Rauschenberg Residency addresses ecological considerations
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Part of our selection criteria is to invite artists/creative thinkers working in the field of environmental sciences or whose work challenges important social or environmental issues of our time. We also incorporate an environmentally focused residency with a theme that relates to the broader issue of climate change and that has an equally important local/regional impact.

Whether intentional, specific and program driven, or place oriented, reflective and artist driven, the residency experience at these eco-residencies contribute to a growing understanding of a quickly changing world and a cadre of artists who reflect that world in their work and in the places and communities they affect through their work.

I will add here that I believe residency programs are in a unique position to help in understanding how we will deal with Climate Change and the impact it will have in the next 50 years. I hope the survey can enable greater understanding of the power of residencies to help artists gain a perspective on their work, their purpose and their contribution to the Future of Creativity.

Thank you