

RE ° The Residency is
Not a Destination,
but a Doorway

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Editors' Introduction

As you enter the Swedish Arts Grants Committee offices in Stockholm, you are met by a long corridor that leads to a shared kitchen. Along the left side of the corridor are a series of numbered white doors. Each door opens to an artist studio, which is temporarily occupied by the national and international artists, designers, and makers attending the IASPIS residency programme. Over time, if you repeatedly walk down this corridor, you will notice that the residents exercise their own door policies. Some residents' doors remain firmly closed, and there is no way of knowing if anybody is there. There are some residents who leave their doors fully open, and you can glimpse or stare at their temporary studio set-up. There are others who leave their doors slightly ajar – communicating, “I would like people to know that I am here, but I do not really want to be disturbed”, or, “I feel self-conscious that I am closing myself off to the world outside.”

A number of years ago, there was a story going around connected to a resident at IASPIS. The story concerned how a well-established graphic designer/artist, over a three-month period, left their studio

virtually unoccupied. The resident, from time to time, would wander into the IASPIS building, sit in the kitchen, drink tea and chat to the other residents and staff working at the Swedish Arts Grants office. On one of the last residency days, the resident donated a series of vinyl black numbers, each with a different font, to be used as door numbers for each artist studio. These numbers stayed on the doors for several years.

*The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you
 Don't go back to sleep
 You must ask for what you really want
 Don't go back to sleep
 People are going back and forth
 across the doorsill
 where the two worlds touch
 The door is round and open
 Don't go back to sleep*

Don't Go Back To Sleep,
 Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī

Artist residencies are the archetypal conduit of learning-by-doing. The artist arrives, rests and/or creates work, interacts with people and place, and then leaves. They may come back again for another trip, or some people might come and visit them, but overall, the residency is often treated as a destination, even if this is temporary and provisional. Even though residencies are modelled around novelty, there is something very old-fashioned about them. Like grand tours, zoos and museums, they have always seemed to me to be a hangover of an earlier, but still ongoing colonial and imperial era. Like most imperial rituals,

their abundance and visibility makes them appear benign, but that is often far from their origin point. For the artist residency specifically, the emphasis is on a learning model based on performing actions and gaining “experience”, and a line can be traced from this right back to British nobility and landed gentry’s independent excursions, and finding oneself in Europe in the 17th and 18th century.

In actuality, creative residencies are never as final as is implied by the notion of mobility and temporariness, because they involve issues of managing social relations. For the very few who actually get to experience an art excursion paid for by a cultural institution, residencies often involve a disproportionate amount of emotional labour, organising and care work. The artist exists as a satellite without a tether, relentlessly invited to reorganise relations that were once ordinary and invisible. Every meal is an arbitration in nutrition, every excursion is a reconnaissance mission in wayfinding, every conversation a (re)negotiation. For the host, residencies press against pre-existing “frictions”¹, such as fuelling gentrification of a place, performing a

series of material and social extractions, stratifying mobility and access, as well as a litany of additional barriers circulating around absence/presence. The most meaningful residencies I have experienced were valuable precisely because of a multitude of material, social, ethical and interpersonal exchanges, and micro-frictions that come from holding space with others. These experiences were anything but final. They lingered. Stuck. Rubbed. Took. Gave. Returned. Things were permitted to cross too easily, or not easily enough. Residencies aren't destinations, they're doorways.

What happens if we take seriously the idea of a residency as a doorway? In the first instance, not only do doors allow traffic in both directions when open, but they can also be closed to keep things outside/inside, present/absent, even if this is only fleeting. The door is a metaphor for transition, transformation and liminality. It creates connections between two separate spaces, such as between the living and the dead, the seen and the forgotten; doorways constitute boundaries and thresholds that could possibly be controlled; and they form

between-spaces, expressing liminality and, conceivably, deviance.

The word “threshold” originates in folk and farming cultures. Some accounts state that a plank of wood was used to separate hay from the outside, designating a part of the house or barn in which corn was threshed, or stamped upon, separate to the outside². Crossing a threshold marks moments of ritualistic passage where we can travel great distances, while only moving a few feet. What might seem like a small movement to outsiders, allows the inner group to pass over from inside/outside, life/death, sacred/profane, or conscious/unconscious.

Newgrange in Ireland is a passage tomb—a freestanding portal—its doorway is a gateway to the dead and a dwelling of the divine *Tuatha Dé Danann*. Whereas the *Haus Tambaran*, or Spirit House of Papua New Guinea, is a home imagined as female form. Made from wood and plant, the doorway is shaped as a naval, the interior being equated with the womb, reminding its inhabitants of where we all come from.

In addition to transporting travellers to inaccessible realms, doorways have also long played a protective role to help keep certain things out. They can actively distance others as part of a complex configuration of the transcultural modalities of place, and social, spiritual and spatial needs. It currently takes 137 workers, 670 kg of black silk, 220 g of gold and silver thread, and around 8 months to create the Kiswah that covers the Bāb ar-Raḥmah, (“the door of Mercy”), at Mecca, Saudi Arabia³. Any Muslim is supposedly allowed to enter, but only those authorised by guardians of the monument, the Al-Shaibi family, have held this privilege for 15 centuries.

Throughout history, doorway rituals have shielded a space and its inhabitants from harmful energy. In Gulf maritime folklore, women made wishes for the return of their loved ones by hanging salt pouches in doorways when their sons and husbands went to sea. In the 6th-8th centuries, in what is now the nations of Iran and Iraq, the voices of the weak that were broken, men in battle, women raging or women afflicted, would hire a professional magician to inscribe a spiral

prayer onto a bowl from the beginning to the centre. Intended as amulets, the prayer bowls were buried face down to capture demons, and commonly placed under the threshold of homes until the wish came true.

Today, in the UK, archaeologists still regularly discover large collections of clothing deliberately concealed within the fabric of 16th- and 17th-century buildings. Often these objects have been hidden in the voids and “dead spaces” around doorways or chimney stacks. Much of the clothing is heavily worn, soiled and patched, showing numerous repairs, whilst many of the objects have been deliberately broken or ritually “killed”. Often referred to as a spiritual midden, these foundation deposits are considered to possess trapped spirits or counter malevolent forces.

Whether hard, soft, permeable or translucent, each doorway ritual mentioned above allows communities to determine how others relate to them by creating specialised and specific blocks, demands, access or distance. Returning to the creative residency, sociologically,

creative residencies are all about settlement. Settlement that takes place as something, or someone, comes in or goes out through a door. What would be possible if human and more-than-human residents, locals, elders, leaders, carers, guests and hosts decided what doors would remain open, what would remain closed and for how long? What material, social and economic flows would be encouraged and diminished through this strategy?

In an age defined by boycotting, refusal and resistance (in response to walls, borders and surveillance), paying closer attention to what worlds require greater attention, and what entrances should be monitored, becomes an urgent counter-proposal. Doorway practices could offer a nuanced safeguarding response to normative and dominant powers—that flow freely through cultural and academic institutions—and that naïvely promote universality and openness as ideas freely available to all.

Culturally speaking, doorways are a figurative way to a space beyond the existing ethical framework. Like portals,

carrier bags and holograms, they help rehearse towards a better place. For Robyn Maynard, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2022), seeing portals in our day-to-day is a wayfinding tool to step through and reimagine our world anew⁴. For Ursula K. Le Guin (1988), carrier bags are a different way of telling stories about ourselves⁵, and Cassie Thornton's Hologram project (2019-ongoing) is a peer-to-peer support model for helping its users get to work underneath the work that needs to be done⁶. The residency-as-doorway refuses learning-by-doing as a final destination, and instead becomes a lens to reconsider the causal chains of uneven and, at times, extractive connections, distances and crossings that they actually are. Do the right things return with us from the residency? What things do I take and consume, compared to what I give in return? What needs to remain untouched, and what can never be the same again if I arrive?

Beyond thinking of doors in the singular dimension of controlling what is let in and out, taking up a new perspectival model could help us imagine new ways to

reorganise relations to site and creative production. The call to reorganise relationality is the nucleus of that thing “we” collectively and politely call Climate Change. In actuality, for many of “us”, in highly industrialised societies, every modern interaction and connection requires unlearning, reconnecting, refocusing, resituating, regenerating, and relearning—and doing this change together. Changing behaviours works best when we create new rituals.

Many doorways have been pre-programmed, demonstrating that habitual crossings are often habits waiting to be broken. A scientific experiment asked an entire building of office workers to quit smoking. The scientists gave half of the newly ex-smokers a new entrance to the building, asking them to enter work from a previously unused backdoor, whilst the other half continued to use the same entrance. All the smokers who used the new entrance didn't smoke at all for the duration of the experiment, whilst those who continued to use the familiar entrance gave up halfway through⁷. Comparatively, تعارف (taarof) is an Iranian tradition of extreme

politeness, humility and mutual respect, where someone makes oneself seem secondary to another. When entering a door, *taarof* is demonstrated by making the other person go first, to show respect. This can lead to people getting stuck, politely insisting that the other person go ahead. At once a beautiful and rich cultural tradition, this dance could also be perceived as an insincere way to control others, creating a hierarchy where a superior person is shielded or protected from criticism, due to deference. I'm interested in what doorway rituals might help us break the habits that need sunseting. What new entrances can rewrite daily rituals of convenience and consumption? What new practices can enforce new hierarchies that don't currently exist but should—like prioritising those most affected, who are often the least responsible and the least likely to be recognised and prioritised.

Figuratively, the door better captures the role of the residency within artistic creation and production. If we peer through, we can think of the creative excursion as something that is not final, but transitional and transformational.

Doorways refuse the normalised model of dropping in to do some “learning-by-doing”, and instead becomes a lens to reconsider the whole experience as a reciprocal and mutual facing of each other.

Residencies lead to places. This isn't only for the purview of the host and the guest, but proliferates wayfinding architectures for others to use and follow for years to come.

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Biography

Dr Dani Admiss is a creative climate leader, independent art curator and informal educator. Often working with a coalition of agitators, dream-weavers, growers and caregivers, her work is a journey of learning to live well with others, within limits. In 2021, she founded Sunlight Liberation Network (SLN), an independent art and climate justice network that supports peer learning and imaginative action toward building better tomorrows. Admiss has created numerous projects in the UK and EU. She was an Artangel Making Time resident (2023), and a Stanley Picker Fellow (2020). Her PhD is in Curatorial Practice and World-Making with an AHRC grant (2014-2017), and she is an advisor on the editorial board of *Digital Materialities and Sustainable Futures* Book series, Emerald Press.

RE: Design Residencies publishes commissioned texts on design and architecture residency and fellowship programmes. Practitioners, curators, educators and residency organisers provide reflections, case studies and provocations on the role, value and impact of residency and fellowship programmes on contemporary practice and education today. RE: Design Residencies is a project collaboration between Stanley Picker Gallery at Kingston University and IASPIS, The Swedish Arts Grants Committee. The project has been developed out of two forums with many of the invited guests contributing further with texts based on their presentations.

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