

RE... Production,
Reproduction, and
Residency Forms as
Forms of Organising

Martin Born

Editors' Introduction

A number of practitioners attended both forums, and contributed generously with presentations and through discussions. Having both organised and participated in residency programmes, we invited ex-designer Martin Born to share some of his thoughtful and provocative reflections from the forums.

I want with this text to consider a few points that stood out to me through my participation in the *What does a Design Residency do?* forums. Thinking, as I was invited to in the thematic frame of *Design/ing Residencies*, about spatial practice residencies as forms, themselves, of spatial practice, the below thoughts follow two impulses in particular:

“A sense of production that is quite similar everywhere.”¹

“We love to discuss these inequalities.”²

Thinking around these points and others that shape my work at the moment, a question for me became: What might a perspective on residency-typed spatial practices³ be that sees other than the idea of production, and that might open up some pathway beyond the problematic that the second statement points to?

*Residencies and the bygone age
of capitalist liberalism*

*The bygone age of
capitalist liberalism*

Times have changed since 2021, when, together with a group of fellow curators, we wrote an article for the *Finnish Architectural Review* titled “Residencies as spatial practice.”⁴ At the time, having somewhat depressed the memory of Trump v1 yet still despairing that Biden could be some other thing than liberalism’s death flower, we hung our cultural conviction and “hope for the world” once more on what Alan Gilbert has called an “ethical yet pleasurable cosmopolitanism mirrored by a new movement of people and goods.”⁵ Enlightened understanding – knowledge ever enriched in the diverse-ideas-centrifuge of a cross-cultural critique powered by global mobility – was going to right the course of Spaceship Earth.

Today, not just the uselessness of this ideological manual in the struggle to yank the planet any fraction of a degree away from full-on climate meltdown has buried this conviction. The unceasing

exploitation by the military-economic machine of Western welfare of the soils, waters, and people it continues to other – including its cold-blooded assistance in Israel's eradication of Gaza and dehumanisation of the people of the West Bank – has made a painful joke of the idea that there would be anything humane about this ethics; that the extension of its polis was anything like cosmic; and that its movement had anything to do with responsible action.

The ideological intimacy of artist residencies and capitalist liberalism

To take it but as a historical coincidence that artist residencies bloomed in the ideological biotope of this “universalist” (neo)liberalism would be well-meaning – too snugly fits their operating mode with the credo of a free flow of ideas, goods, and people. Instead, it will not be inaccurate to say that the labour of those – of us – who granted or were granted (at least semi-)permanent residency in Art's hyperlocal citizenry along their way of temporary presences/presentations in continuities grounded around the globe did not just co-align with, but benefit from as well as promote this my theme.

This is to insinuate no ill intention. The ambitious gravitas of an ever consolidating, ever-tightening, ever more self-conforming, and ever more granularly and deeply self-instituting ideological system has issued massive pressures; and all the while, its deepest insidiousness has been the genius of its camouflage as freedom and “development.” And thus it has been because of and despite these pressures, and not least since residencies in art and spatial practice more often than not conceive of themselves as offerings of space for introspection and critical reflection on their/our environment(s), that great amounts of earnest intellectual labour have been dedicated to and through residency-typed forms to understand and work around our intimacy with the troubled complexions of our age.⁶

What after liberalism?

*After liberalism,
what can residencies do?*

Yet now, past that epoch by time, thought, and political outlook – what can residencies do? To think about this, it

may be worth considering the notion of production and the cognitive disposition it imprints, prominent as it has become as a template for self-(con)figuration not just in residency practices but as a greater, at times seemingly ultimate, motive of contemporary Western culture.

*What could this
residency produce?*

When thinking back along the path of my curating residencies, I can easily see how the questions I used to ask myself about the purpose of those endeavours formed quick like mercury into some variant of *What might they bring?* or *What might come from them?* *What could we do with such a programme?* *How could its outcomes, effects, results, impacts, takeaways change this city, the discourse on our professions, the fate of the planet, perhaps?* What I thus asked myself when I asked *What might this residency do?* was in effect *What could this residency produce?*

Production's picture

Production, though, is a curious metaphor. It is the image of a motion that brings to the fore (“guides forth”: *pro-ducere*) some thing (the “brought-to-

the-fore”: *pro-duct*). However, the motor of the motion remains greyed out in this image – generic, magic, unnamed, indescrpt: industrial park, corrugated box, hermetic factory, generic office. (Through any unit of time, what would be the total hours of product videos running through our screens, compared to those on production conditions or facilities?).

The gaze of production is thus a curtailed and curtailing, black-boxish perspective whose narration does not begin before the outlet. It is the image of cars rolling from the assembly hall, the launch (of books or rockets), the thought of *some* apparatus “releasing” products. These products then – conclusive as they then are as *things* in space, time and concept – provide themselves to us as the defined coordinates for our consideration. All the while, their releasing apparatus remains outside of inspection.

*(Of course, production
cares about the apparatus
(but in its way))*

To be sure – of course, the apparatus holds more than a marginal position in the attention of production. And, to

stay with the (in many ways badly unfit) analogy, it would of course be wrong to suggest that residency participants and operators would be indifferent to the “apparatuses” of the residencies they partake in or operate, and would not critically examine the influences they exert as generators of their production.

Yet, from Toyota Production System through Agile Methodologies to today’s saturated market for tools that streamline (even home) music production – the concern for the factory in the production view is instrumental and subordinate: yes, the factory is under constant supervision; but the telos and focus of this supervision remain the product and its ever-development. To the gaze of production, the factory is of concern only in regard to its “leading to light” the good and ever-better output.⁷

The role and work of critique

To complete the production picture, it is necessary to quickly revisit the role and work of innovation or, in discursive settings, *critique*.

For reasons similar to those for which Armen Avanesian conceptualises *crisis* as a means of capitalism to extend and expand itself, critique can be seen to play a pivotal role in the reproduction of the factory of enlightening knowledge. Through its revision of the product, cultural critique, like the industrial product review, also facilitates the product's *reversion* (*Umkehr*) back to the factory: to the extent that critique fixates itself around the product and issue itself as critique of *it*, it sustains the factory in its position as the main address, and main addressee for its demand for correction: "This cannot stand – back to the drawing board!" Or, in Avanesian's words:

The perpetuation of a crisis-ridden status quo is – as has already been argued, but has certainly been overlooked by the critical Left – a means of legitimizing ongoing 'reforms.'⁸

Avanesian's use of "ongoing" here points out the effective stasis that characterises the mode of existence of production/critique: the latter's re-/con-version of the product back into a matter of *further*

production is critique's contribution to sustaining the former as the organising ideo-logic. That is – and nothing new here then, of course – critical production, to the extent that it intends itself back into its own cycle, is a means and medium for the *uncritical* reproduction of its generating apparatus as the main organising arrangement.

Production is reproduction

This way it appears that production really is *reproduction*: in that it sustains the outer boundary of the product as the outer boundary of critical significance, production works as reproduction's *tool*. In this sense, we can then wonder if practices, residency-typed or other, which focus on *production* really are focused on reproducing themselves, together with the arrangement(s) that produced them.

Simply said (and to still continue with the so unfit analogy), what criticism does not (can not) do is take to a green or brown field in the neighbourhood to re-work or set up another factory.

*Organising and
other reproduction*

Organising

In order to overcome this (self-) constriction, a perspective and approach appear needed that are not bound into the product capsule, and cycle, of production and critique, but that has access to the dimension of *reproduction*. I suggest that this can be the perspective and practice of *organising* – for two reasons.

Due to the way that the view of organising includes in its purview the producing arrangement, looking not past but through the product, so to speak, as one more component of that arrangement's work for auto-reproduction, it changes the question of *What do Design Residencies produce?* into the question *What do Design Residencies reproduce?*

Secondly, to avoid re-usurpation of the reading thus achieved back into the same cycle that serves the reproduction of the present and would thus prevent it from coming into acting for reproducing one or the other *other*, organising must not

be critique, but practice. For then the question changes one more time: from *What do Design Residencies reproduce?* – a critical, thus cyclical inquiry – to *What can, what might, what could Design Residencies reproduce?*

As will be clear, this perspective does not simply draw wider than that of product-critique. It is all differently based in the proposing ideo-logic of designing practice: in the expectant question of *What if?* that makes each flick of the finger in hot-glueing a mock-up; in the at (most) times (most) unsettling condition of not-knowing-before-itself that is design's angst and dynamo as a practice for *dark meaning* – meaning that might be because it could be made.

*To organise
other reproduction*

Whether for its failure to offer a mobilising counter-proposition to the challenges of the illiberal (far-)right, or due to the creeping discovery of its complicity in the direst injustices committed against planet and people, the *Selbstverständlichkeit*⁹ of capitalist liberalism as we know it – and by whose

knowing we have known the world – has reached some sort of end; and with it, the *Selbstverständlichkeit* that it had granted inside of itself to art, design, and architecture, collateralised as they were by their productive contribution to its reproduction.

As knowledge is knowledge only to the cognitive system that values/validates it as such, knowing is downstream of organising. And not just etymologically, but historically, enlightenment has been a desire for interior lighting – the illumination of the present world through ingestion of knowledge.¹⁰

Spatial practices that organise for other reproduction must therefore, and can only, be “ex-perimetral”: *suggestive*, not ingestive; working without construction license in some critically unjustified dark to try and hot-glue into existence ways of organising arrangements that might reproduce because they just might. If they do, maybe more than return with a differently lit understanding of a past’s interior, they can achieve grounds for understanding in another one.

References

- 1 Onkar Kular, in a pre-conversation with me about writing this text.
- 2 Johnny Chang, in his talk in the first forum.
- 3 The great variety in the forms and formats that can compose (design) residencies has been vividly present in this symposium. As the proposition of this text to some extent depends on further muddling what [components of] residency-akin forms could be or do, while emphasising the capacity they have for organising space(s: ideological, economic, conceptual, imaginal, physical, ...), I use this admittedly, somewhat bulky, phrase.
- 4 Martin Born, Chris Burman, Luke Jones, Kaisa Karvinen, and Tommi Vasko, "Residencies as Spatial Practice," *Ark*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.ark.fi/en/2021/04/residencies-as-spatial-practice/>.

- 5 Alan Gilbert, “Francis Alÿs’s ‘The Gibraltar Projects,’” e-flux, December 13, 2024, <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/646129/francis-als-s-the-gibraltar-projects>.
- 6 See this symposium, for example. Also: Taru Elfving, Irmeli Kokko, and Pascal Gielen, *Contemporary Artist Residencies: Reclaiming Time and Space, Antennae-Arts in Society* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2019).
- 7 Or *outcome*, in the lingo of sustainability.
- 8 Armen Avanessian, “Criticism – Crisis – Acceleration,” in *Survival Kits. An Artist’s and Thinker’s Book*, ed. Deborah Ligorio (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 56.
- 9 “Self-evidence” in daily use, but also, literally, “self-comprehensibility”/“self-comprehension.”

- 10 A seemingly punny insinuation (“to *en*-lighten/ *il*-luminate: bring light *into*,” compare https://www.etymonline.com/word/enlighten#etymonline_v_8693). But as we know through the work of Graeber and Wengrow, the period that is historicised in the West as a cultural flowering in Europe might need much more to be understood as an illumination of Europe by sparks given by (native) American thinking. See David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London: Penguin Books, 2021).

Biography

Martin Born was a designer and curator. He practices and studies other economies and forms of organising with the XORG re/search group for experimental organising, the Cobble Stone Salon, Autonomic.cc, the Economic Space Agency, and in a PhD research at Aalto University's Department of Art and Media.

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.

Coordinators: Magnus Ericson,
David E. Falkner, Onkar Kular
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