

**Artists' Communities:**

# Making the Case

A report on perception research conducted by the Alliance of Artists Communities in the Fall of 2005.

The Alliance of Artists Communities conducted a series of individual interviews in 2005 with a broad group representing various opinion leaders and constituents of the field of artists' communities. The intent of the interviews was to gauge current perceptions and awareness of the Alliance and the field, and to solicit feedback on how the Alliance and the field can better communicate their value and increase their visibility to others. The responses will assist the Alliance and the field be better advocates for artists' communities—informing the way we communicate about the field as a whole—as well as individual organizations.

*The Alliance of Artists Communities is the national network of artists' residency programs. We contribute to the nation's cultural vitality by:*

- *giving a collective voice to artists' communities*
- *promoting successful practices in the field*
- *advocating for creative environments that support the work of today's artists*

*The Alliance is the only national organization representing programs that support artists in all disciplines, believing that collaboration and exchange that cross traditional boundaries furthers our culture's progress.*

*The Alliance includes more than 250 members—a diverse field of artists' communities, residency programs, individuals, and institutions that support living artists in the creation of new work—from across the US and in more than a dozen countries worldwide.*

*The Alliance acts as a collective voice on behalf of its members, small and large, leveraging support for the field as a whole.*

*Artists' communities...*

- *serve over 12,000 artists each year*
- *provide an estimated \$36 million in direct support (stipends, travel, materials, room/board, etc.) to artists and other creative individuals each year*
- *support artists of all disciplines—including visual arts, performing arts, music and composition, choreography and dance, creative and scholarly writing, poetry, filmmaking, and digital media*
- *enhance the cultural lives of their communities through performances and exhibitions, workshops and classes, studio tours, youth programs and more*

*These creative communities are as diverse as the people they serve: urban or rural, fully engaged with the public or completely private, serving one artist at a time or 50, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration or supporting one genre, serving young, emerging artists or those established and well-known. With more than 250 artists' communities in the US, they differ in every way you can think of, and yet they are all based on the belief that supporting artists in the creation of new work is absolutely essential.*

# Artists' Communities: Making the Case

## Methodology

From August through October, 2005, the members of the Alliance's Advocacy Committee asked approximately forty people of diverse backgrounds, interests, and expertise to share with us their thoughts and opinions on the field. The focus group included private, public and corporate funders, legislators, gallery and museum directors, educators, artists, media, directors of other arts service organizations, policy-makers, and others. Participants were recommended by a variety of sources in order to cultivate a broad cross-section, and they were assured anonymity in their responses. The participants all responded to the same questionnaire, which was developed with the assistance of a market research consultant.

In preparation for the interviews, the Advocacy Committee developed a series of statements about artists' communities as a field which were presented to the focus group and judged for their effectiveness in making a strong case for artists' residencies.

## Challenges of Terminology

### *What's in a name?*

Whether you use artists' residency, retreat, colony, or community, there are challenges associated with each term. The word "residency" is now more widely associated with teaching or outreach for a stretch of time—"in residence" at a school, museum, or presenting organization—rather than a creative residency. Some interview respondents weren't able to distinguish between the different kinds of residencies, even after reading materials that described creative residencies. Still, this is the most widely-used term and is particularly useful for artists-in-residence programs that are part of an organization with other programming, where "colony," "community," or "retreat" don't apply.

"Artists' retreat" has its own challenges, as there are many retreats that are non-competitive, for-profit places for artists. In addition, "retreat" sounds more like a vacation than other terms, increasing the challenge in clarifying that artists go to such a place to work. One respondent commented: "Retreat" sounds like a place where you go to get away from it all, not a place to work. It should really be more of an advance than a retreat."

"Artists' colony" connotes a particular model of institution (generally, a rural, isolated place removed from the public) that doesn't represent the diversity of the field at large, though there is a long history in the term's usage. "Artists' colony" has also been used to describe a town or area where many artists have historically gathered. Other uses of the word "colony" have negative or questionable connotations as well (such as leper colony or nudist colony).

"Artists' community" is also confused often with towns or areas where artists have gathered or with artists' co-ops and other permanent residences.

Some in the field use "visiting artist program" to distinguish between programs for local artists or the local community. This term makes the most sense when the program is part of a larger institution, rather than a stand-alone "artists' colony."

Whichever term is used, it's important to have a clear definition and description of what the organization does to follow the organization's name.

### *Defining the creative process*

Another term that can be misunderstood is "creative process." Many artists' communities refer to their organizations as places where artists go to "engage in the creative process." This term is used to distinguish artists' communities from other production- or outreach-driven activities, and in recognition that an artist's creative process while in residence may or may not resemble what is traditionally thought of as work. The challenge, however, is that those not familiar with the field don't understand what "creative process" means and don't realize that artists are actually working, thus perpetuating a stereotype that residencies are more a vacation than a place to engage in serious work. Most interview respondents preferred "the creation of new work" to "engaging in the creative process," and understood that such creation could involve time spent in reflection as well as more hands-on art-making.

## Knowing Your Audience

Most artists' communities are good at communicating their program to potential artists-in-residence, while addressing funders, community partners and the press can be more of a challenge. The key to communicating effectively with anyone or any group is truly knowing your audience—what is important to them, what motivates them or "turns them on," how much they already know about you and what you do, etc.—and then pinpointing the message to match.

As discussed above, language can be key in getting your message heard or getting it ignored. The first lesson is to remember that *you are not your target audience*. The language that works for you may not work for donors, and the language that works for donors may not work for artists. Successful communicators understand that different messages are crafted for different audiences—even when the core information you are trying to communicate is the same. What artists' communities do is not the challenge (or at least not the biggest challenge) to garnering support from the diverse groups necessary to build a thriving arts organization. Knowing how to craft and deliver effective messages with the right language for the right audience is where we need to improve.

## Current View of the Field

When asked to define artists' communities and residencies, those familiar with such programs responded that they are "time and space for artists to reflect and create." While this general concept may be known, the perception of artists' communities still reflects a singular model—that of a rural, secluded retreat for writers, primarily, and painters, secondarily—that does not represent the breadth of the field. For those residency programs that fit this model, it can be a challenge to establish themselves as contemporary organizations, meeting the needs of today's artists. For those outside that model, it can be a challenge to both associate with and differentiate from the field.

Indeed, even among those most familiar with artists' communities, there is little sense of a "field." Most respondents have heard of one or two well-known programs nationally, and perhaps a few in their region. Word-of-mouth was the most common way the respondents were familiar with specific residencies—knowing a friend or family member who had attended a residency, for example—and in all, thirty-six different residencies were named (of approximately 350).

While it is the task of the Alliance to represent the field as a whole, many respondents stated that individual residencies could also talk more about the field, as a way of increasing the viability of the work done by each artists' community as well as an opportunity to define what makes it unique, compared to other residency programs.

## Messaging Results

Respondents spoke largely of the lack of simple, concise statements that convey what artists' communities and residencies are, especially statements that offer analogies to concepts outside the arts. Often residencies describe themselves in terms of mission or philosophy, leaving those who are less familiar to ask, "But what is it?" At their core, artists' communities provide artists with time and space to create new work. Because there are so few institutions dedicated to creation and experimentation, interview respondents noted that finding an appropriate analogy outside the arts is important.

The idea of artists' communities as "research and development labs" resonated well with most respondents, especially those not immediately connected to the field. "This message puts it into a very left-brain world language. It's understandable." ... "Research-and-development lab' is exactly what it is—an opportunity for artists to begin to do something they wouldn't be able to do otherwise." ... "A-ha! I get it now!! That should be your bumper sticker."

For example: *Artists' communities are research and development labs for the arts.*

This basic message could then be followed by further clarification of the analogy: *They provide artists with the opportunity to create new work, and encourage risk-taking and innovation toward the creation of new art and ideas.* Respondents were particularly interested in artists' communities as places that "encourage risk-taking and innovation," and the value of "new art and ideas" was related to the development of culture and human progress (see *Major Messaging Themes*, below). Relating this work to the science and business fields also rang true for many respondents, who commented that there is greater understanding today of the need for innovation and intuitive leaps, which have come to be so highly valued in business and research sectors.

**"Artists are not on the periphery of cultural development—nor on parole from it either—but central to it."**

### *Major Messaging Themes*

Three major themes emerged among all target groups regarding messages needed on the field:

1. The creation of new work and ideas is essential to human progress. Show how residencies support this creation, and demonstrate outcomes and impact.
2. Place residencies within a broader context of artistic creation, from process to product to presentation. Make a case for supporting creation, in consort with production and presentation, rather than isolating residencies from other institutions that support the arts and other steps in the process.
3. Demystify artists' communities, especially regarding the following myths:
  - a. Artists are fragile and can't work without special privileges.
  - b. Residencies are vacations for artists where they go to drink, have affairs, and navel-gaze.
  - c. Artists' communities are elitist institutions for established and well-connected artists.

*Theme 1: The creation of new work and ideas is essential to human progress. Show how residencies support this creation, and demonstrate outcomes and impact.*

"Artists are not on the periphery of cultural development—nor on parole from it either—but central to it," said one policy-maker.

Respondents thought the role of residencies in supporting the creation of new work and ideas that shape the world is best shown by demonstrating the impact and outcomes of residencies. "The arts operate largely in isolation from the world around them. We need to reintegrate the arts and artists into the world around us. It's okay to provide isolation for artists to work, but then what? What impact does it have? People need to know that."

While residencies support the intangible creative process, the outcomes are often quite tangible, such as the completion of a new film, funding given, audiences reached, a new direction in an artist's work, support for underserved artists, etc. Respondents were also interested in anecdotal impact, in combination with data that show the outcome of residencies on artists, on the local community, and on society at large. "You have to show outcomes. You won't have a roomful of Mattises out of a colony, but when you hit one you need them to give testimonials about this."

“Storytelling is remarkably effective. You guys must have a billion stories that you can share of how an artist’s experience with an artists’ community translates into a body of work that ultimately has an impact on the world.” ... “Funders are never sure what will come out at the end when funding creation, which is scary for funders, so you have to find a way of getting across the outcome of residencies—the impact on artists, the work created, what happens when artists return to their communities.” ... “You need examples to humanize the concept. Talk about the work that comes out of artists’ residencies—both recent and historic stories. Even for those who know and understand artists’ residencies, what better legacy than to support artists today who will have a long-lasting effect on our culture, fifty or one-hundred years from now? Everyone wants to know that their support will have an impact.”

Several respondents suggested artists’ communities become more savvy at showing the economic impact of their program within the local community and on artists-in-residence. Some recommended using existing research to make a case—such as data from the National Endowment for the Arts’ research on economic development in rural areas—and connect that research to how artists’ communities support underserved artists.

One message around this theme received mixed responses: *Cultural progress depends on new ways of thinking about and reflecting on the world; by providing artists with time, space and community, artists’ residencies actively contribute to the continuing development of culture.*

Most respondents agreed with the first statement, and many thought it could go further: “It’s not just about ‘cultural progress’—it’s bigger than that. Civilization depends on it.” ... “This is inspiring rather than explaining. It puts artists’ communities in a larger context—the broader, more powerful scale of impact—most anyone can understand this.”

“What better legacy than to support artists today who will have a long-lasting effect on our culture, fifty or one-hundred years from now? Everyone wants to know that their support will have an impact.”

However, many respondents found the two statements together to be pretentious. “This is about the cultural sector and only about professional artists; it’s skewed toward the high-brow and exclusive.” Others thought it overstated the role of residencies.

Some suggested simplifying the message into a statement that is fairly universal, followed by an explanation of how residencies serve that idea (for example: *The creation of new work and ideas is essential to human progress. Artists’ communities provide artists with the opportunity to create new work, and encourage risk-taking and innovation toward the creation of new art and ideas.*). Many suggested combining this message with the concept of R&D labs, into the following: *Artists’ communities are like research-and-development labs for the arts. They provide artists with the opportunity to create new work, and encourage risk-taking and innovation toward the creation of new art and ideas essential to our human progress.*

*Theme 2: Place residencies within a broader context of artistic creation, from process to product to presentation. Make a case for supporting creation, in consort with production and presentation, rather than isolating residencies from other institutions that support the arts and other steps in the process.*

Another common challenge for residencies is linking the invisible creative process to the visible products and presentations. “The public separates artists from the work—they value the work, but there’s a disconnect between their appreciation for the product and appreciation for the maker and process. You need to more consciously make the link between the two for the public. Rather than just talking about process and shying away from the product, make a tangible connection between the two.”

“Residencies are part of an integral process from the creative process to the product. I don’t think residencies are as effective as they can be in communicating how support for residencies means supporting creation of new work, something we as funders don’t have enough opportunities to do.” ... “What role does a residency play? Fit residencies into the legacy of creating, fostering and cultivating new work. You have to make the invisible visible.”

“There needs to be much greater understanding of the creative process, a sense of the developmental aspect, that leads to the product development and then leads to the consumer. I like to think of the creative food chain, that has to start with the artist. It’s like *Driving Miss Daisy*—it started out with a playwright and ended up selling a lot of popcorn. Where does a residency fit in the food chain?” ... “Funders, presenters and others need to be told how supporting the process leads to the work that gets on stage.”

There is a tendency among the field to remain esoteric in reference to the “creative process” without making it clear that the process ultimately leads to production and presentation of new work. Many respondents, particularly those outside the arts, suggested that artists’ communities be more upfront about how support for creation results in performances, books, exhibitions, etc. “Residencies are not an end to themselves, but once an artist has the opportunity to create work, then he/she needs to find an audience. It’s a logical progression.”

Interview respondents stated that it is important how this concept is stated, and they did not respond well to statements that imply that artwork would not exist without residencies. For example: *Imagine museums and galleries with nothing to hang, silent concert halls, bookstores and libraries devoid of texts, and dance with no choreography. Tomorrow’s masterpieces depend on support for today’s artists. By providing time and space to create, artists’ communities nurture the next generation of creativity.*

Respondents found this approach melodramatic, over-reaching, and off-putting. “This seems like a twisted, backwards approach—a special pleading that appears weak.” Several respondents pointed out that many of today’s masterpieces did not depend on supportive environments, and that art will survive even if its institutions do not.

On the other hand, many responded well to more positively-stated messages that show residencies as a pivotal step in an artists’ process from creation to presentation. One message that received positive feedback related to this theme, aimed specifically at funders and donors, is: *While we may purchase art, attend a performance, or buy a book, our society offers few ways to support individual artists in the creation of new work. Artists’ communities offer a way for patrons to make a meaningful investment in the artistic process.*

Respondents commented that this is a compelling statement in support of the field, but asked that we identify more clearly how artists’ communities play a role in the creation of new work and broaden the statement to speak to others outside the funding field. The following message was developed in response to these comments: *While many institutions exhibit art and present literature and performances, our society presents few ways to support individual artists in the creation of new work. Artists’ communities fill this critical need—and offer an opportunity for others to make a meaningful investment in the artistic process—by providing today’s artists with the time, space and support needed to create tomorrow’s masterpieces.*

*Theme 3: Demystify artists’ communities, especially regarding the following myths: Artists are fragile and can’t work without special privileges; Residencies are vacations for artists where they go to drink, have affairs, and navel-gaze; Artists’ communities are elitist institutions for established and well-connected artists.*

In general, few are in-the-know as to what actually goes on at artists’ communities. Respondents encouraged the field to demystify residencies by explaining simply that artists are there to work, something that the public is more inclined to value. “There are a lot of unknowns with artists’ communities, which leads to questions about their value. What really happens there?”

Many myths about residencies and stereotypes about artists still exist. The image of artists as fragile and privileged was frequently mentioned by respondents, who cautioned that by portraying artists’ communities as “safe havens,” “free from the pressures of everyday life” and “with no strings attached” perpetuates a stereotype of artists as incapable of working under ordinary constraints.

“I like to think of the creative food chain, that has to start with the artist. It’s like *Driving Miss Daisy*—it started out with a playwright and ended up selling a lot of popcorn.”

For example, the following message polarized the respondents: *Artists’ communities invest in individuals rather than projects, supporting artists in their creative endeavors with no strings attached or demands for production. Residencies offer the freedom of time and space, and entrusts today’s most talented to exercise their own creative instincts within an environment that supports their vision.*

The message received positive reactions exclusively from those who fund individual artists: “This one expresses and gets to the heart of what artists need—investments in them and in their creative endeavor. Thinking, creative time, space.” Most respondents, however, reacted negatively to this statement, feeling that it portrays artists as privileged. Many thought that “creative process” didn’t sound like serious work (see “Challenges of Terminology” above). “Sure, we’d all love to go to work and say, ‘Hey, I don’t feel like having any demands for production today,’ but what’s so special about artists that they don’t have to have any strings attached?” ... “This sounds too much like a vacation. There’s too much emphasis on ‘no strings attached’ for anyone who’s not already a convert.” The idea of residencies as a vacation also perpetuates the idea that artists take advantage of their residency to drink, have affairs, and contemplate aimlessly. “You need to counteract the notion that artists’ colonies are a place for people with loose morals where they go to be adulterous.”

Rather, respondents were interested in language that shows residencies as professional organizations, serving serious artists in the pursuit of new work. “Connect residencies to career development of creative people as part of our production economy, rather than making it sound like art camp.” ... “‘Creative endeavors’ doesn’t imply the level of work involved during most residencies. That’s what artists do there—they work.”

The notion that artists’ communities are elite institutions for well-connected artists also persists. “Many artists’ communities suffer from images of Harvard and Yale, especially the more established ones. There’s a perception that it’s a club, that it’s for older, more established artists. And there’s a perception that they may not be as diverse as they need to be. Artists’ communities need to find a way to address this.”

One message in particular was poorly received: *Artists’ communities act collectively to level the playing field, in an unusually democratic movement where talent and drive are rewarded regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, economic status, age or education, serving both emerging and established artists.*

Many respondents questioned the truthfulness of this statement, while some felt it was important to show that artists’ communities are not an elitist club. Some respondents noted the increased professionalization of the art world and expressed concern that artists’ communities are not reaching artists who haven’t come through traditional networks (e.g., MFA programs). “The hardest thing to overcome is the sense that there is a privileged group that might seem to get all of the residencies. Diversity needs to be a high priority, not just lip service.” ... “I don’t agree that they are democratic—I think it’s more based on artistic excellence, which is not particularly democratic.”

While there is no universal message to dispel these myths, it is critical that residencies consider these misconceptions in their communications. To this end, it is important that artists' communities be transparent about how artists are selected and emphasize the diversity of artists they serve (with respect to ethnicity, age, geography, career level, etc.). In regards to the residency-as-vacation myth, consider how you might describe your program differently to artists you are hoping to attract versus funders and others who would benefit from understanding the level of serious work developed while in residence.

## Knowing Your Uniqueness

While there is still a great deal of education that needs to occur about what artists' communities are in general terms, it is also essential to find what makes your organization unique within the context of the field.

In analyzing the mission statements and director's quotes submitted about their organizations for the 3rd edition of *Artists Communities*, it is clear that a majority of messages about individual organizations within the field actually describe the category, rather than what makes each organization unique within the broader field.

Some examples (with names removed):

- "The Residency program provides artists with focused time for unfettered exploration and completion of work in a supportive setting. The program encourages personal growth and interchange between artists."
- "The xxx Center is a place where artists are granted the opportunity to be productive in a supportive environment conducive to self-challenge and experimentation."
- "The solitude, uninterrupted time, and an appropriate workspace, all within a supportive community of other creative people, make for the perfect environment."
- "Artists have the opportunity to spend their residency in quiet, contemplative solitude and immerse themselves in their work."

While not exactly the same, all of these statements are more descriptive of the field of artists' communities (or a segment of it) than of the individual organizations. Without the identifying characteristics of name or location attached, one cannot distinguish which artists' community is being described.

The Alliance often hears from funders and others that artists' communities do not appear to have a sense of how they fit into the field at large. As the field of artists' communities matures and continues to communicate with a wider public, it will become increasingly important for individual organizations within the field to gain a better sense of themselves and what makes them unique within an important segment of the arts ecology.

"Years ago it was possible to fundraise with a portfolio of nice stories about how important the work of individual artists was. Not any more... Good advocacy work is dependent on good research."

## Supporting Data

Making the case for residencies must include accurate data on the field. Funders often state that they receive conflicting data in grant applications from artists' residencies, which diminishes the organizations' credibility and professionalism. Conflicting claims as to oldest, largest, etc., also give the impression of a field that is not cohesive or aware of its peers.

The Alliance is routinely asked by its funders, members and others for data on artists served, support given to artists, number of artists' residencies in the U.S., history of artists' communities, and more, which more accurately promotes the field and contextualizes individual programs. "Good advocacy work is dependent on good research," wrote one funder. "Years ago it was possible to fundraise with a portfolio of nice stories about how important the work of individual artists was. Not any more—funders want facts, data, and any other appropriate information that tells them that they can prove to their boards that funding artists and artists' communities is good business and healthy for communities across the country. Good data and research mean good policy and that means good advocacy. Everyone is competing for the same dollar."

The Alliance's data, however, is dependent on the data collection of its members. Each of the major themes expressed above can be strengthened by supporting data. For example, exit interviews and evaluations, as well as good alumni relations, can provide anecdotal information on the impact of residencies on individuals. Encouraging alumni to stay in touch and to credit a residency in their work can also assist organizations in making tangible connections between a residency and works that were created or inspired during a residency. Collecting demographic information—age, career stage, location, educational background, ethnicity, etc.—of both applicants and artists served can help each organization identify its strengths and areas for growth, articulate to funders and others the efforts being made to serve a diverse group of artists, and dispel some of the stereotypes about the field.

As the nerve center for the field, the Alliance can—with such information provided by its members—offer the broad view of artists' communities and residencies to encourage greater awareness of and resources for the field. Together we can continue to champion living artists and support for the creation of new art and ideas. •

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