Dual Citizenship: Artists Residencies in the US and Abroad

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As if running a nonprofit organization and an artists’ residency program weren’t challenging enough, several organizations have set up shop in both the US and abroad, programming across borders, languages and cultures, as a sort of dual citizenship for artists’ communities. Among these are New Pacific Studio (Vallejo, California, and Mt. Bruce, New Zealand), Villa Aurora (Pacific Palisades, California, and Berlin), and Virginia Center for the Creative Arts (Amherst, Virginia, and Auvillar, France). For these organizations, managing a double identity in the US and abroad reflects their commitment to celebrating and understanding both the intersections and divergences between cultures, through the art, artists, and local communities that form the fabric of each organization.

Villa Aurora’s history stretches back to the 1930s, when the German Jewish writer Lion Feuchtwanger and his wife Marta were forced to leave Germany and purchased the Villa in the Pacific Palisades. From the start, Villa Aurora was conceived as an international meeting place for artists and intellectuals, fostering a lively transatlantic exchange in literature, the visual arts, science and politics. After Marta’s death in 1987, an initiative was organized to save the Villa and keep it in the public domain, with significant support in both the US and Germany. In Los Angeles, the Foundation for European-American Relations was created; the Circle of Friends and Supporters of Villa Aurora was founded in Berlin; and the German Federal Foreign Office and the Berlin Lottery Foundation provided the funding for purchase, renovation and operating costs for the first three years. While most of the arts programming—including the residency—takes place in California, the Berlin location continues to serve as the administrative hub, a vital connection to German artists and audiences, and host to exhibitions, screenings, readings, and other events in support of Villa Aurora’s artist-in-residence alumni.

New Pacific Studio grew out of the experience of founder Dr. Kay Flavell—a New Zealand native and then-Associate Director of the Davis Humanities Institute at University of California-Davis—who saw a need for a movement to explore contemporary life of both indigenous and migrant peoples of Pacific communities. After a ten-year run of the Pacific Bridges Project—an international program of workshops, conferences, and exhibitions—New Pacific Studio was founded in California in 2000 and in New Zealand in 2001. Both sites host artists-in-residence, and while the Vallejo program only operates during the summer, New Pacific Studio-Mt. Bruce operates year-round and offers a variety of other programming, in addition to the residency.

Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, which operates an artist-in-residence program on the rural estate of Mt. San Angelo, Virginia, has a long history of international exchange. VCCA-Mt. San Angelo has facilitated residencies by artists from across the globe since 1971, and has also worked to ensure that the local community benefits from the presence of these visiting Fellows. In 2004, VCCA began its Le Moulin à Nef residency program in the medieval village of Auvillar, in Gascony, France, with the gift of the historic buildings by the Denver-based Donnell-Kay Foundation. Now both sites host artists-in-residence, as well as opportunities for Fellows to share their work with the local communities. VCCA is also celebrating its near-twenty-year exchange partnership with the Oberpfälzer Künstlerhaus in Schwandorf, Germany; together they have provided residencies for ninety-two visual artists, writers and composers to date.
Le Moulin à Nef created the need for some new structuring for VCCA, with a new nonprofit based in the US to handle contractual and financial obligations, and another organization in France to oversee day-to-day operations of the property. Le Moulin à Nef operates on a considerably smaller scale than VCCA-Mt. San Angelo, and governance of both entities is shared by the board of VCCA in the US. Similarly, Villa Aurora operates as two nonprofit organizations—one based in Los Angeles and the other in Berlin—with one board of directors to govern both institutions. (Villa Aurora’s board consists of six trustees—four Germans and two Americans—elected by the organization’s members in Berlin.) New Pacific Studio, on the other hand, is made up of two financially independent nonprofit organizations with two separate boards (with Kay Flavell as roving executive director of both organizations). This autonomy has allowed NPS to chart a significantly different course at each site, while still operating under a shared vision.

“NPS-Mt. Bruce is our primary site,” states Kay Flavell, and this is reflected in the extensive programming for the local community that takes place there: school visits, presentations in libraries, open studios, even potlucks with neighboring farming families. NPS-Vallejo also conducts local programs, but on a smaller scale, relying more on local partners for school programs, exhibitions, and other projects. Its proximity to the San Francisco Bay Area can be a challenge for NPS-Vallejo, too. “We do not have the same visibility because of [the number of cultural institutions] all around us,” says Flavell. In New Zealand, on the other hand, NPS is located in a rural environment, surrounded by sheep and dairy farmers, the national wildlife center, and the Tararua Mountains. As the only international artists’ residency program in New Zealand, NPS has established good local visibility and presents a number of programs that are especially resonant for the local community, including projects that address the local ecology and oral history of migration and settlement in the region.

Villa Aurora is predominantly a German organization, with the core of its operations taking place in the US and the spirit of cultural exchange at its heart. More than 80% of Villa Aurora’s funding for its US operations comes from Germany, and German artists are the focus of Villa Aurora’s residency program (artists needn’t be German citizens, but have to live and work primarily in Germany at the time of their residency application). The vision of the Feuchtwangers which continues today, however, was not simply to celebrate the legacy of German artists and intellectuals and to provide opportunities for German artists, but for US and German cultures to both benefit from these activities.

VCCA’s primary site is Mt. San Angelo, which is reflected in VCCA’s governance as well as the scope of its operations. The residency program at Le Moulin à Nef operates for three months out of the year (VCCA’s Mt. San Angelo residency runs year-round), and four artists are in residence at a time, compared to twenty-four in Virginia. “We hope to replicate the best of a VCCA experience in the smaller venue at Le Moulin à Nef,” says Director Suny Monk. The differences in size have some advantages for Le Moulin à Nef: because the artists all arrive at the same time for their month-long residency, the intimate group has a greater opportunity to bond as a collective of creative individuals. In its second year of providing residencies, already the program has grown, with the recent leasing of Maison Vieilhescazes, an adjacent building owned by the village of Auvillar which will provide housing for artists-in-residents. (Previously, artists stayed in local gîtes or vacation rental houses and worked in studios at Le Moulin à Nef.)

Villa Aurora, Pacific Palisades, California.

VCCA-Le Moulin à Nef.
Residencies are particularly fertile ground for exploring multinational exchange for a number of reasons. Bringing a group of artists together for an extended period of time allows the residents to uncover the connections and distinctions between them, and go beyond cultural stereotypes and surface impressions. The intimacy that grows from living and working in close proximity, and often sharing meals together, also provides artists-in-residence a unique opportunity to exchange ideas, traditions, and perspectives (and often, food!). The spirit of artistic experimentation and risk-taking that is at the core of residencies fosters an environment of openness that, time and time again, has encouraged collaboration, interaction and exchange between artists of different backgrounds, disciplines, and approaches.

The interaction between the organization and the local community is also important in developing cross-cultural connections. Prior to being taken over by VCCA, cultural exchange programming was already a tradition for ten years at Le Moulin à Nef, so “there was a good understanding of what we do,” states Monk. VCCA has continued in that vein, requiring artists-in-residence there to participate in a community activity during their stay—a public reading in the town square, a musical performance in a local venue, open studios in the ateliers. As the program develops, VCCA is mindful of how the organization can continue to engage the local community in meaningful ways. This ongoing concern is evident in VCCA’s Mt. San Angelo operations as well. Fellows there often interact with the local community as college class lecturers and public school classroom visitors, through readings at bookstores and libraries, and as speakers for local civic groups. Connections often occur naturally between international artists-in-residence and the faculty of nearby Sweet Briar College. This small-town, close-knit environment is something Mt. San Angelo and Le Moulin à Nef have in common, and VCCA has thirty-five years of experience building community in this context.

Indeed, a deep regard for the people, culture, and history of the local communities is something all these multinational residencies share, and like VCCA, this is often reflected in the public interaction and programming each provides.

“Villa Aurora’s audiences in both LA and Berlin are similar,” explains Director Claudia Gordon—those interested in contemporary art in general, in the history of German exiles, and in European-American cultural exchange. The founders’ vision wasn’t simply to promote German artists, but to provide a place in which artists could exchange views and establish connections between US and German cultures. Public support for Villa Aurora in the Pacific Palisades indicates the strong desire that exists in the US to continue such dialogue. Villa Aurora’s work in Berlin provides German artists with ongoing opportunities to present their work to the public, and generates greater support for the organization’s mission as well. And rather than simply relying on the artists-in-residence to facilitate cultural exchange through their residencies and subsequent work, the Berlin and California offices have collaborated together on several transatlantic programs. For example, Villa Aurora’s symposium “All Mixed Up” highlighted multicultural and multilingual American and German authors, with the first part being held in LA in April and the second in Berlin in November of last year.

Because New Pacific Studio was founded on a commitment to the cultures of the Pacific, both sites have extensive projects that engage, interact with, and reflect the local communities. At NPS-Mt. Bruce, however, acceptance of the visiting artists didn’t come easily to the small community. Flavell worked to build trust in and respect for the program through story collecting, including the stories of local families. “Story Spot” was launched on Main Street in Eketahuna in January of 2003, and at the end of that year, NPS received funding from New Zealand’s government grant program, Creative Communities, to publish a historical brochure of these collected stories. The brochure, Footsteps through the Forty Mile Bush, is now much in demand in tourist information centers.
This interweaving of visiting artists’ projects with the local culture shapes much of NPS’s programming, both in New Zealand and in California. At Mt. Bruce, an environmental initiative headed by NPS has led to the construction of a public walkway from a nearby scenic riverfront reserve to the Anzac Memorial Bridge. The Mt. Bruce facility has become the Kaiparoro Historic House Museum, with public tours and historic consultations. The organization also hopes to develop NPS-Mt. Bruce as a space where Maori and Pakeha (the Maori term for all non-Maori New Zealanders) live and work together; a blessing ceremony by Maori kaumatua was performed at the property earlier this year. In a few short years, NPS has done much to help revitalize this small farming community, and is seen as a valuable part of the local culture through NPS’s historical memory collecting, outreach to schools, benefits to museums and craft circles, environmental work, and renovation of the well-known and long-neglected historic property.

In California, similar projects are underway and NPS has been warmly welcomed by a supportive circle of Bay Area members. Their environmental and historical work, in particular, has met with enthusiastic response. Flavel is currently conducting interviews and researching the history of the NPS-Vallejo facility, a farmhouse dating from the 1870s. Later this year, NPS will be staging a small exhibition in the Vallejo Naval and Historical Museum called “Living in and Around the Vista, 1876 - 1976 - 2006.” NPS has built on Vallejo’s sister city relationship with Akashi, Japan, by hosting Shigeko Nakanishi, a member of the Japanese delegation, to work with Japanese-American school children. Flavel in turn visited Akashi, hosted by the Japan-New Zealand Association in Osaka, and her experience there has shaped the work being done at NPS-Mt. Bruce as well. Exchanges have taken place between local schools in Vallejo and New Zealand, and NPS arranged for artwork and writing from New Zealand and Japan to be entered in the annual Pacific Flyway Festival for San Francisco Bay.

Being a multinational organization involves a great deal of diplomacy, patience, and a strong sense of identity. Villa Aurora’s founding vision supports its dual existence, both as a chronicler of German and German-American cultural history as well as a supporter of contemporary artists. It’s not simply a matter of balancing historical programming with residencies and promotion of living artists; it is rather an ongoing dialogue, one that began at Villa Aurora some seventy years ago, about the ways in which both Germany and the US can benefit from a greater understanding of each other.

For VCCA, a keen sense of what is special about their organization is essential. “The ‘personality’ of VCCA,” explains Monk, “is formed by our rural, southern location, our work ethic, our mixture of genres, ages and experiences, and our history of community, [combined with] the element of internationalism both in Virginia and in France.” Understanding their limitations in a foreign country is also important. “[At Le Moulin à Nef ], we will always be outsiders, Americans, ‘others’ in the eyes of the villagers,” says Monk. “Theirs is an ancient, intimate extended family that is welcoming but somewhat distant. C’est la vie.”

More than a simple linear exchange between New Zealand and the US, NPS approaches the communities and cultures around the Pacific holistically and looks for ways to connect them to each other. The organization relies greatly on the individuals it attracts—from its board of artists, environmentalists, writers, Maori scholars, and community leaders to its artists and staff. Artist Terra Fuller spent three months at NPS-Vallejo as an intern this past summer, while her husband, Ecuadorian classical guitarist Luis Octavio Cordova-Torres was an artist-in-residence. Terra has now become Acting Director at NPS-Mt. Bruce, and hopes to set up her own artists’ residency in Ecuador. This kind of organic evolution and exchange is what NPS is all about, and staying small, personal and nimble allows for these connections to develop as they arise.

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The studio at NPS-Vallejo, with works by Judith Moyer Shamp and Terra Fuller.