

ARTICLES

An Artists' Residency Provides the Chance to Rethink Sustainable Practices of Art Making

Eight international artists selected for a month-long residency in the South of France find new ways to reconcile their art with environmental aims.

Lisa Reindorf May 20, 2019



Foundation art residents, from left, Deana Kolecikova, Abdul Musa, Shaunak Mahbubani, Vanessa Enriquez, Caoilinn Hughes, Mathew Marchand, Jessica Blau,(not pictured) Lisa Reindorf (2019) (photo by Nelcy Mercier)

MANDELIEU-LA NAPOULE, France — The stone walls of the 13th-century castle Chateau de la Napoule plunge into the sparkling Mediterranean Sea. Carved creatures embellish the ramparts and towers. It was a place of privilege, not exactly the setting one would expect to find lessons on sustainability in the arts, yet, I would be surprised during my stay.

Eight international artists had been selected for a month-long residency in the South of France, sponsored by the La Napoule Foundation. An adjacent villa — once the home of a princess — houses the artists, but the medieval castle would be my home for the month. The labyrinth of corridors is hard to navigate and eerie at night, but the ocean view from my room is mesmerizing.

In the morning, I hear a scraping of metal as a gate opens. Vanessa Enriquez inserts a large bronze key into a turret door. Inside, iron grilles provide stunning views out to the sea. However, the piles of recycled VCR tapes on the table preoccupy her. Enriquez, a Mexican-born artist now living in Berlin, creates three-dimensional drawings using recycled magnetic tape.

Her constructions are gorgeous geometric structures. They exist temporarily in architectural settings, and are then dismantled for reuse. The pile of tape, previously installed in Berlin, would take shape as a twisting arch in the turret



Vanessa Enrique, “Fluctuations_5”, (2017), magnetic tape, 260cm x 180 cm, (photo by the artist)

As conscientious artists we are all concerned with environmental and global issues. Indeed much of our art deals with these very topics. But how do we reconcile our art with environmental aims? During the residency the question preoccupies me, and at dinners in the soaring banquet hall our conversations percolate with ideas.

Temporary and reconfigurable art like Enriquez’s provides one good example of material reuse for a sustainable art practice.

In a skylit studio, Malaysian sculptor Abdul Multhalib Musa and I chat about our background as architects. Inspired by fractal patterns found in nature, he generates mathematical models for immense sculptures, which are sold to corporations and private collectors. He is a modest, thoughtful man, with a career that many would aspire to.

Most of the art market revolves around sales like this, whether through galleries, fairs, museums, or the artists. While art objects are often beautiful and meaningful, this business model consumes resources and puts more material into the world. But this is how most artists make an income. It is a quandary for those who are concerned about the environmental impact of producing numerous art objects.

I walk out to the garden, where green topiaries and scented rosemary invite contemplation and wonder whether there are artistic paradigms that are more ecological, re-envisioning how artists produce and deliver art.



Grand Allée Gardens (photo courtesy La Napoule Art Foundation)

One evening, painter Matthew Marchand proposes a nocturnal adventure. A silvery light shimmers on the ocean as we tiptoe into a shadowy park where he will place an object he made during the residency. Marchand is committed to an idealistic practice with his own system of rules.

He creates exquisite paintings and art books, which he digitizes for sale. He then “reverse shoplifts” as he puts it, by depositing his work into the place where they were created, allowing whoever finds it to take it. It is a deliberate commentary on art commerce where art is merchandised. He positions his creation under a lemon tree, where it sits alone, waiting to be discovered.



Mathew Marchand, “Sketches for art book”, (2019), watercolor on paper, 5”x7” each, (photo by the artist)

For my own ecological art experiments, I mix biodegradable paints in my sea-view aerie studio. Bottles of syrups distilled from indigo, curry, blackberries, and chlorophyll are ready to pour. But the consistency is wrong, so I run to the beach and gather seaweed for a thickening agent. The plant-based paint functions surprisingly well and provides a glossy clarity that is quite suitable for my paintings on oceans and sea rise.

It’s certainly beneficial to the environment to use non-toxic and recyclable materials, and the art itself focuses on ecological issues. But I’m looking for a significant sustainability path — a reimagining of artistic process. Deana Kolenčíková, a Slovakian artist, provides it. She intervenes in urban settings to bring attention to real estate and land use. One of her projects repurposed a large sign, which she painted with “A Louer” (to rent) and rolled in front of municipal buildings as a comment on commercialization.

While walking to a bakery, Kolenčíková shouts, “How can this be?” A fence bisects a bridge over the canal, with one side public and another privately owned. This sparks an idea. She paints discarded sheets “Private” and “Public,” then drapes the banners off the bridge. An inventive twist — art as intervention, using existing infrastructure. The art is already there; the artist’s action makes it a powerful statement. Such a witty provocateur!

During our stay the area was roiled with protests about climate change and economic justice. Shaunak Mahbubani, a young curator from India urges us, “Let’s go to the march in Nice!” Protest is an action that challenges, and this draws in the artist. Mahbubani has a curatorial practice engaging marginalized or underserved communities on issues of queer identity, socio political structures, and resistance cultures.



Deana Kolencikova, "Ici" (2018), sheets and paint, 300cm x 240 cm

One project Mahbubani curated, *Towards Resistance*, explores protest culture in a weeklong series of events and performances. During the residency Mahbubani researches behavior, objects and language of the Gilet Jaunes movement (the Yellow Vest movement). And here is another powerful idea: People and their political actions are the art, art as protest, as event, and as a community process.



Deana Kolenčíková, "Save our planet" (2019) children on gravel, 560 x 340 cm (photo by the artist)

It is energizing. My brain is lit. Back from the march, I sit on a seaside terrace, pondering what I've observed. The artists have inventive ideas on artistic practice, but if an artist effects a temporary creation or a performance piece, is there an art product that can be monetized? And if not, how would the artists support

themselves from their artwork? And here I crash into the stumbling block of truly sustainable art.

The artists at the residency rely on grants, donations, and outside jobs. If we want to shift from art as commodity to ecological sustainability, artists need to be supported by a much greater investment in the arts. Art educates. It heals, inspires, and connects the communities that artists serve. What if instead of buying a large sculpture, a business sponsored art events for underserved communities? Or what if the public paid an artist to view her art intervention, or the government gave grants for artists to curate participatory experiences?

Some inspiring ideas on sustainable art emerged from our month in the castle and our bubbling cauldron of discussions — the use of recycled or eco-materials, environmental themes, existing infrastructure interventions, and art as performance. But the most important sustainable arts idea stood out: shifting the paradigm on how art enters and exits the world outside the artist's studio.



Chateau La Napoule, 2019, (photo by Lisa Reindorf)

At one of our last evenings together, the foundation hosted a seminar with local university students. Over glasses of wine, we excitedly chatter in a mix of French and English. Kolenčíková presents one of her projects. On an abandoned petrol station, she repainted the lettering each month. If passersby paid attention, after five months the phrase “nothing here lasts forever” (in her native Czech) is spelled out. It is a fitting epigram on all artistic work.

Lisa Reindorf

Lisa Reindorf is an architect, artist, and environmental activist. Her paintings depict rising seas and coastal construction. A graduate of UPenn and Columbia University, she considers science, art, and activism a key part of her practice.