Despite Covid Challenges, Some Artist Residencies Are Thriving

From Iceland to Arkansas, residency programs have found creative ways to reinvent themselves.

A view of the studio building and adjacent barn exhibition space at the Baer Art Center in Iceland. After canceling residencies last year, it added an extra session for 2021.

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This article is part of our latest Fine Arts & Exhibits special report, about how art institutions are helping audiences discover new options for the future.
Few places in the world are more isolated than the east coast of Skagafjordur, Iceland, a wide tidal inlet at the Arctic Circle, where the Baer Art Center sits on the grounds of a horse-breeding farm outside one of the country’s oldest trading ports.

As a rule, only 10 artists are invited each summer to stay in the monastic white studios during the two residency sessions. Adam Thorman, an abstract landscape photographer, expected to attend in June 2020, on a much-anticipated return to the island after a calamitous trip 13 years earlier, when gale-force winds knocked over his tripod and smashed his prized Mamiya 7 II camera in a still-smoldering lava field.

“I was in the process of buying a flight to Iceland, things were paid for, planned,” he said. “Then the pandemic happened.”

A residency is an intentional form of social distancing, different from what we have become used to, affording an artist time and space to contemplate, or complete work in progress without other distractions, often in the company of creative peers.

Studios, workshops, tools and specialized equipment; a staff to provide skilled assistance; sometimes three square meals and housekeeping: this form of arts funding has been a breeding ground for prominent artists, including the monologuist Spalding Gray at the MacDowell in New Hampshire; the composer Lea Bertucci at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Nebraska; and the artists Rashaad Newsome at Eyebeam in Brooklyn, and Danai Anesiadou at Fogo Island Arts off Canada’s eastern coast.
That definition of retreat changed drastically last year as many of these spaces shut down. According to Res Artis, a global database of residencies, which conducted a Covid-19 impact survey, 54 percent of planned residencies were canceled or postponed, and one in 10 organizations supporting artists closed indefinitely.
Their updated March 2021 report also notes that 65 percent of artists surveyed were compelled to pursue work outside the arts, while 12 percent considered quitting entirely. Emerging artists were disproportionately affected.

Not all programs ground to a halt, however, as some museums and institutions were able to pivot. And certain artists discovered the pause had unintended consequences for their creative process.

In March 2020, the musician Roberto Carlos Lange, whose stage name is Helado Negro, and his wife, the visual artist Kristi Sword, were invited to perform their multimedia collaboration “Kite Symphony, Four Variations” at Ballroom Marfa, in the Texas town that has become a beacon for groundbreaking art. The New York-based couple planned to stay two weeks, but got stuck isolating there for six months.

“It was a ghost town,” Mr. Lange said. “When we arrived, the world locked down.” And so their stay became a de facto residency. “The time we spent in Marfa reprogrammed our brains a lot,” he said. “It
was a moment of focused creativity because there was nothing else to do. We just dug in more, trying to fill the unknown void.”

They kept experimenting and found that being in a place remote by nature helped cultivate work they will present next year. Another outcome: The couple decided not to return to New York; they instead relocated to North Carolina. “It’s always hard to pull the trigger, but Asheville felt like a cool middle point,” Mr. Lange said.

Creative success stories aside, the pandemic was a financial challenge for residency programs. Laura Copelin, the director at large for Ballroom Marfa, said that the organization struggled with how to continue being generous to artists, and one result is Ballroom Sessions — The Farther Space, a new residency model for exploring cross-disciplinary work inspired by West Texas, which will extend to 2026.

As with so many other sectors, going virtual proved to be another solution. The performance artists Nick Vaughan and Jake Margolin were expected to arrive in March 2020 for a three-week residency at the Momentary, the contemporary satellite of the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Ark., to produce “The Ballad of Jesse and Steve,” the Arkansas portion of their “50 States” project, which identifies facets of each state’s queer history before the Stonewall uprising of 1969.
“Our work is community facing,” Mr. Vaughan said. “As it became clear the Momentary was shutting down, they figured out a one-week virtual residency, free-for-all.” It became a pilot program, and allowed the museum to rethink how people gathered.

While the duo put much of their collaboration with local artists on hold, they were able to work remotely with others, including the New Orleans composer and string player known as Free Feral.

Soon, Mr. Vaughan and Mr. Margolin realized that their decades-long life’s work was slowing down, but also growing in scope: An ancillary project emerged during the virtual residency, a reinterpretation of a work originally performed live for the CounterCurrent Festival in Houston. The new work, performed remotely, is titled “Sitting in One Pandemic and Thinking of Another,” referencing the H.I.V./AIDS crisis.

Baer, in Iceland, held Adam Thorman’s space until this summer. “Steinnun, who runs it, gave me first dibs,” he said of Steinunn Jonsdottir, the arts center’s director and founder, whose family funds it. And, indeed, Ms. Jonsdottir found herself in a quandary when Iceland reopened this year.
“It made the whole application process much more difficult for me,” she said. “I felt that this summer I had to make up for the cancellation of 2020. I couldn’t reject the wonderful artists that applied. That’s why I added the third session.”

This time, Mr. Thorman brought backup cameras.

*Correction: Oct. 26, 2021*

An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of an artist residency in New Hampshire. It is the MacDowell, not McDowell.