

Uniting The Digital and The Real



by Carol Epp

Carole Epp is a practicing ceramic artist from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. She is also mother to two young boys and the editor of the internationally read blog “musing about mud.” You can find her online through various social media outlets.

carolepp.com

NEW EDUCATION

As artists, we are drawn to the romantic notion of the craftsperson laboring away in a studio, compelled to create at any cost, feverish with the desire to evolve his practice, content in his solitude, self-sufficiency, and silence. But we are also social creatures. Most of us have a craving for community, education, and support that sends us out of our studios to seek other like-minded practitioners. We also *require* a community for professional development. Growth and education are important to artists, and together as a community of makers, craft artists are seeking new forms of education.

Online involvement is increasingly necessary for artists in building their careers, educating themselves, developing creatively, and establishing an audience. That involvement is about marketing and business but comes packaged with heaping doses of social interaction, visual inspiration, informal educational opportunities, and community support. The environment of an artist’s residency is similar, but it provides a more synchronous relationship between the participants and is weighted more toward professional development. Through the informal learning environments of both social media and artists’ residencies, the ceramist’s studio is expanding beyond its brick and mortar walls: artists are finding new sources of inspiration and ways to increase their productivity.

Social media may seem inconsequential to those who are new to the arena of online connectivity, but through analyzing how we use social media, we can explore a prime example of peer-to-peer learning, a form of collaborative or informal learning wherein all participants are learning at the same time. Through sharing their activities, participants develop cognitive connections in stages, leading to greater learning overall. In other words, the best way to learn is to teach, strengthening a continuum of life-long learning. Commentary on blogs and Instagram, information-sharing on Twitter, images pinned on Pinterest, and studio snapshots posted on Facebook are allowing our community to learn, and thus, grow at an unprecedented pace. Feedback is immediate and accessible globally, and our community is reaching audiences and



consumers that might never before have had access to the labor of a maker, the thought process of an artist, or the techniques of a craftsman. Artists are becoming both the teacher and the student in a constant, cyclical, and hacked educational environment. We are both consumers and producers of information and content. Our involvement is active rather than passive.

Building an online community or a “friends” list means that we are able to source content relevant to our practices. The “following” of galleries, publications, critics, artists, and cultural producers internationally and the breaking down of barriers of language and geography that has ensued has led to an eye-opening system of education in contemporary art practice. By simply posting an image, one can invite others into a studio and share a process. One can “crowd-source” information and peer critiques as readily as one would in a shared studio setting.

Internet-based collaborative learning with other makers, and online interactions with consumers, researchers, historians, theorists, and critics are grounded in real-world scenarios, such as artists’ residencies. Connections and relationships built online are strengthened in person. Residencies bring artists together from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds, with a variety of research interests and levels of experience, both technically and professionally. Residencies offer the excitement of travel, new cultural experiences, dedicated research and production time, and most importantly, direct relationships with other creative producers in an informal, professional, and yet, personal setting removed from the everyday bustle of life.

“Residencies [allow us] to share [our] work and ideas with like-minded people and distill [those ideas] as you hear what others think. [...] I am able to see what I lack in my own work and improve accordingly. Learning is a continual process of keen observation.” –Boon Kiat (James) Seet, Medalta resident artist

What does a residency have in common with online initiatives? Both are maelstroms of creativity, informal learning, and professional influence with tangible applications

OPPOSITE PAGE FAR LEFT:

Work in progress by Krisaya Luenganantakul.

OPPOSITE PAGE RIGHT: *Work in progress by Thomas Cheong.*

ABOVE: *The Historic Medalta Potteries in Medicine Hat, Alberta, Canada, 2013.*



ABOVE LEFT: A shared meal at Medalta.

ABOVE RIGHT: Artists at work in the studio at Medalta, 2013.

that affect not only the participants but also the greater community. Online informal learning begins as a blog post – a pebble in a pond. Its pulse reverberates and impacts other producers; it is one element of a growing ecosystem. And that system is accessible in a way unattainable prior to the popularity of social media. Similarly, residencies offer advantages to the greater community and not solely to the participants, in that each artist gains new knowledge and insights, which manifest themselves in the artist’s work and in his contact with his local and online communities.

UNITING COMMUNITIES

In September 2013, The Medalta International Artist-in-Residence Program in Medicine Hat, Alberta, exemplified the common attributes of digital and real-world “communities of practice.” Aaron Nelson, Medalta’s artistic director, invited artist, social activist, educator, and social media guru, Vipoo Srivilasa to curate a group of artists from the Southeast Asia region that traveled to Southeast Alberta, Canada, for a month-long studio-based residency called SEXSE (Southeast by Southeast). These artists worked alongside ten artists from North America, who were selected by Medalta. While Srivilasa has built a successful career through the production of exquisite sculptural ceramics, his social engagement and cultural exchange projects have put his work and ideas directly into the hands of various communities – artistic and not – and have fostered growth and opportunity for ceramic artists internationally. Srivilasa is a prime example of the prolific artist who is also an altruistic community builder. Residencies and online initiatives are his tools.

SEXSE’s invited artists Boon Kiat (James) Seet, Krisaya Luenganantakul, Thomas Cheong, and Teo Huey Min spent one month at Medalta. There they developed new work, collaborated with each other in some cases, and worked side by side with Medalta long-term residents and staff, including Jason Desnoyer, Jessica Hodgson, Noriko Masuda, Laura McKibbon, Naomi Clement, Joshua Primmer, Les Manning, Jenn Demke-Lange, Jenna Stanton, and Aaron Nelson. The cultural exchange went



beyond the lively conversations that arose over communal meals. Artists' histories and traditions were present in their work, whether in a predominant way or as a subtle aesthetic. Contemporary concerns and subject matter extended beyond geographical borders; the artists found common ground in shared experiences. Working daily side by side, these artists shared their lives and life perspectives in very intimate ways, and these moments were often shared online as well. In an interview, Seet said: "I think that because the Internet provides an endless resource of artists from all over the globe, the world has become smaller. Online, I am inspired and challenged by seeing the great works from all around the world, and that keeps me going, it keeps my ideas on fire. Residencies allow me to gather all my thoughts from all the compartments in my brain and make them real. [...] The residency at Medalta really brought that all out. Sharing with other artists, seeing all the works being made, and exposing myself to the thoughts and skills of the artists makes a wonderful kaleidoscope of experiences that brings out the best in me and my work."

Works produced during the residency ranged from sculptural portrait works to clay animation, from functional pieces to abstract explorations of material and form. Each artist undertook a variety of investigations, some of which will remain experiments; others spawned new trajectories of creative work. As they worked in their studios, the artists revealed the layers of their work, such as narrative, aesthetic, research, and technique. As the artists exposed their stories, processes, and research online during the residency and catalogued the resulting interactions, they engaged that online community of practice in a similar way to their shared studio experience. Being a part of an online or residency community added transparency for the artists' audiences. Social media tools allowed the artists to better engage audiences because the artists revealed more about their art; they exposed more layers of meaning, which lead their audiences to an enhanced understanding.

ABOVE LEFT: *Work in progress by James Seet at Medalta. 2013.*

ABOVE RIGHT: *Work in progress by Vipoo Srivilasa for the Spoon exhibition at Medalta. Each Spoon was a portrait of one of the Medalta Residents. 2013.*

The SEXSE residency artists embodied peer-to-peer learning. Over the dinner table, they swapped cultural perspectives, and in the studio they exchanged technical knowledge and ideas about making art. Through observation, conversation, and physical experimentation, each artist shared, taught, and learned. Although they had never before been all together in one place at the same time, the artists had had previous encounters with each other in person and online before attending the residency. The lineages of how this group of artists met over a period of several years and the professional links that they formed through exhibitions, workshops, conferences, and the Medalta residency were strengthened by their involvement with their virtual community of practice in the interim between in-person encounters.

Their relationships continue to grow through social media interaction, online collaboration, and engagement. Likewise, the impact of the visiting artists upon the residency program's residents and staff and on the communities that interacted with these artists during their stay lingers. These are the ripples in the pond that will continue to spread throughout various communities, dispersing experience, interweaving ideas, and building knowledge.

If I had never been to the Medalta residency,
I would not be able to understand Canadian culture,
food, and their factory history.

—Krisaya Luenganantakul

Since the residency, the artists have been in frequent communication, resulting in exhibitions showcasing the works created during their residency, and plans for international workshops. Medalta played a pivotal role in the interactions between artists and the trajectories of their creative practices. This autumn, some of the SEXSE artists will be participating in "Earth and Fire: Third Southeast Asian Festival," an exhibition and symposium in Lorton, Virginia. Srivilasa is already deep in the planning stages of a residency at Project Art in Cummington, Massachusetts, that will bring together six American ceramists to work on a dinnerware set, which he hopes will be a challenging, collaborative initiative for established artists, providing yet another opportunity for learning and growth.

SUM

In the quiet of our own studios, back in that romantic space of feverish creative exploration, we are never truly alone. The podcasts of other artists play in the background, inspiring images fill our computer and phone screens, and we are constantly in communication with our community of practice. Perhaps we never really wanted that solitude and silence to begin with. I'd argue that we are far more engaged, more professionally aware, and more innovative than ever before. The digital environment, once feared as a replacement for human interaction, has become a part of a symbiotic relationship for artists, nourishing us as we, in turn, nourish and support others.