

Residency Unlimited | Dialogues Interviews Jennie Lamensdorf Curator of Time Equities' Artist-in-Construction Residency at 50 West

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Image courtesy of Laura Fuchs

Lalita Salander: The Artist-in-Construction residency was born from the lineage of one of the staple North American artist-in-residence programs, Art Omi founded in 1992 by Francis Greenberger. Can you speak about the trajectory of a collector/ philanthropist initiating a traditional model, so to say, of an artist-in-residence program and the evolution that brought the idea of

residency to the urban context of embedding an artist within a construction site as an artist in residency space provided by a real estate developer?

Jennie Lamensdorf: The founding of Art Omi and the visual artist residency was critical to Francis' engagement in the art world. Omi was born out of the Triangle Artist's Workshop, which at that time in the early '90's was upstate. Francis had been on the board at Triangle and he and a couple other board members decided to create their own residency. They had ideas about what they wanted that residency to look like, which was different from Triangle and rather than reshape something, they decided to start out on their own. It began very simply, they had a barn for studios and the first several years of artists were housed in the homes of friends and family. It was very peer to peer. That's the moment that I can pinpoint as the beginning of Francis' interest in early career artists and emerging artists and to a lesser degree mid-career. This then shaped the rest of his engagement with collecting and contemporary art.

In 2001, Art-in-Buildings was founded in an organic moment: Francis had a building in Lower Manhattan where he thought the lobby would be more interesting with sculpture in it. From that nascent idea, a program developed that spans three countries, over a dozen sites, and has worked with 110 artists to date. The Artist-in-Construction Residency was born out of these two foundations, Art Omi and Art-in-Buildings. Francis has a lot of experience with residencies, in addition to founding Art Omi, he is an active board member of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council I'm on the Art Omi board and I love residencies as a culture. I guess you could say we already had two really strong examples in Art-in-Buildings and Art Omi that we knew worked and wanted to do something strong. I should say that Time Equities doesn't often build from the ground up, 50 West is a company legacy project. We knew Helmut Jahn's architecture would change the New York City skyline and The Artist-in-Construction residency was a way in which to imbue the significance of this within the building itself.

We wanted art to be of the building from the very start and there were discussions about what is that? How do you do that? What does that mean? What does that look like? There were a lot of

models that other developers have done, but none of them really seemed “us.” For example, there is an Anish Kapoor, Herzog and de Meuron collaboration, which I'm sure is amazing but that's not what our program or Francis' engagement with the arts has really ever been and it wouldn't make sense for us to do something like that. Through a couple months of brainstorming, we came up with Arts-in-Construction Residency. The basic components included: free studio space, one block from the construction site, in a space that had at one point been an office. We also gave them an honorarium and the artists had 24-hour access to their space. Most of the artists made significant bodies of work in those spaces separate from the project they were working on for us. We gave them hard hats with their names on them and access to our construction site. Initially, they had tours of the site and began to develop what part of that project was interesting to them. Ultimately, they produced a painting or series of paintings in response to the construction of the building and those works will all permanently hang in the building upon its completion.

LS: Foundation and legacy have a double entendre in this case. As a curator can you speak about the lattice of meaning that traverses the architectural, the site, 50 West's engineers, skilled construction workers and the implications for the four artists that were hosted, Hugo Bastidas, Bahar Behbahani, Noa Charuvi, and Paul Anthony Smith as residence within this context?

JL: I can't speak for the artists, but what I would say in this context is that construction in this city is constant but largely invisible. I think that's partially due to the fact that all construction hoarding is identical so it starts to become a part of the environmental fabric of the city. We gave the resident artists access to a space that they, along with the general population of New York City, would not normally have access to. We selected the artists intentionally and their practices did influence why we invited them.

For example, the Israeli artist, Noa Charuvi, had a series that she worked on for years painting abstracted versions of destroyed homes in Palestinian territories. At the very early stages of the construction, the site looked very similar to destruction. This was in a way the opposite, but somehow aesthetically very similar, and I think that was interesting to her in the beginning. You wouldn't necessarily have known if the site was the beginning or the end of something. That is the conversation Noa and I had when I invited her to tour the hole in the ground. Noa was our first resident in 2014 and our last resident in 2016. She has gone on to work with different parts of construction sites as part of her practice after the residency.

LS: What you were talking about brings me to my next question, which was as alumni of Omi, these artists lived among the expansive Catskill mountains of the Hudson Valley region for the month of their residency in Ghent, New York. Fast forward to the context of the city, skyscrapers are the mountains of our urban landscapes, scattered throughout cities are the base camps of these mountains; mysteriously masked to passerby's, neighbors, local businesses by construction hoarding. Construction hoarding is a term I wasn't familiar with so I looked it up in the dictionary. Merriam Webster's definition of a hoarding is a “temporary board fence put about a building being erected or repaired.” I was interested in the etymology of the word. The derivations are Old Saxon, hord, treasure, hidden or in most place. I thought that Artist-in-Construction residency confronts this tradition, what does it expose?

JL: Spending a lot of time on the site was a revelatory experience for me as a curator. I was able to do this before the residency while we were figuring out how the residency would function. I observed that skilled workers who are on the site one week are not on the site the next week, they would have moved on to a new project, doing the same labor on sites all over the city. This movement is so

intricate and choreographed, like a ballet, as an intern I had at the time, Ash Duhrkoop called it. I invited Paul Anthony Smith with this in mind. I've loved his series of portraits of laborers from tarmacs at airports for a long time; I was interested in having him consider the skilled laborers working on the construction site. Paul ended up making one group portrait and one solo portrait.

What I didn't expect occurred with Hugo Bastidas whom we invited because he was making paintings of imagined architecture such as a painting depicting the base of the Freedom Tower going up into the Tower of Babel. When we invited him to this space, the building was sort of like that. There was a base and the top was spindly and very much skeletal. I assumed that Hugo would continue this work, but he took a left-hand turn and made a whole series, almost a dozen, portraits of the people working on the building. I thought that change in direction was a fascinating outcome of the residency.

The work produced through the residency will be installed in the building and though the paintings won't be on permanent public display, there is a legacy of the project in the press that is very accessible. As well, all of the works were shown together publicly when we had an exhibition at The Metropolitan College of New York's new gallery space.

In regards to the juxtaposition between the artists experience with the Hudson River Valley and scale in New York City it is interesting to discuss Bahar Behbahani. Bahar lives in Brooklyn and picked up the practice of walking every day to and from the studio, in all sorts of weather. Sometimes she would invite people to walk with her but, usually, she walked alone. This exploration of the urban environment became a part of her practice.

Behar scaled up the size of her painting significantly during the residency. That's largely due to the fact that through the residency she had a studio that was not in her home, there's a practical nature to this escalation in scale. However, I also think it comes from the expansiveness of the architecture of 50 West, the expansiveness of the sky when you're in the building, the gaze hovering above all the other buildings in the neighborhood when looking South. Together with the extraordinary expansive view of Manhattan, walking over the Brooklyn Bridge every day, I imagine that these environmental factors became entrenched in the work that Behar was making.

I think that happens at Omi where the artists are living in a pastoral landscape, as if out of the Hudson River School paintings. There are so many natural and art historical references that come from simply being there and looking out over the vista.

LS: When a viewer is confronted with an artwork in a museum and/or exhibition space they are generally viewing a work of art that lives in a state of completion. On a daily basis, we walk through the concrete and glass city inhabiting and traversing completed building projects. In the landscape of development, AIC provides a window into the invisibility of artistic labor and the invisibility of labor behind the construction. What is the correlation and why is it important? You've gotten to this in response to the previous questions, but if it leads you to any other thoughts?

JL: It is something that I've been thinking about a lot recently. In the Artist-in-Construction residency, the artists were a bit cloistered in their spaces. The artists all had studio visits, by invitation of the artist as well as informal open studios. When their work was shown to the public in the gallery of MCNY, it was in the traditional exhibition context. The invisibility of the artistic practice is more exposed in the Art-in-Buildings projects. What Art-in-Buildings more often does are exhibitions in the public or semi-public spaces of properties that Time Equities owns. I call them semi-public because the public is completely welcome and the projects happen before one gets to a security guard but

there is an invisible barrier to entering one of these buildings without an appointment. There's a weirdness and we try to fight that weirdness by having openings or performances and; to make it obvious that folks are invited and welcome.

I encourage the artists to install during business hours for the Art-in-Buildings projects. Then the people who live or work in that building get to see a project grow over the course of several days. It brings a human element to the installations and is a way of bringing the studio to the public.

LS: Following up on that point, I think an important part of residences is the attention to the space for process within the residents' practice. I thought it was an interesting juxtaposition the process of the construction labor and the process of the artist. Do you have any comments about process in regards to Artist-in-Construction?

JL: The construction management company who ran the day to day of the project was Hunter Roberts. Their head of project was James McCormick and the artist's point of contact on the site. James was very engaged with the artists. He took high-res images of their paintings and printed them onto aluminum. He then hung them in the lift, which is the elevator that goes on the outside of a building before it is finished. Then the people working in the building saw the artists' work grow. The photographs were a replica of a replica of the painting but, it was presented in a really lovely manner. The artwork came full circle, back to the skilled construction workers we were making the work alongside. A couple of them came to the opening of our exhibition. A mutual respect developed and an understanding that the construction workers were specialized, some of them extremely specialized craftsmen and the artists who are, if you distil it, extremely specialized craftsmen.

LS: Exactly. And I think both groups have this, in regards to the broader public, there is a lot that they do that is not seen. So there's that interesting correlation between the two.

JL: Absolutely. A lot of artists toil in obscurity. Even if they have exhibitions in a big space, if you have a studio practice, I think it can be very lonely. The construction site in and of itself made it a little bit more collegial. This iteration of Artist-in-Construction was a pilot program. We were learning what worked, what was smart as we went along and I think it would not have occurred to me to put these sort of screen printed versions of the paintings in the lift, but if we do it again, I would absolutely do that. Everybody was super invested in the artists being comfortable and happy and getting access to what they needed.

LS: There is the commodification of the cool as art brings a cultural capital to development projects. 50 West reimagines the place of the art as stakeholder rather than as incidental location maker with the Artist-in-Construction embedded within it. Can you speak about the broader implications inserting a residency has in the axis of real estate development?

JL: This is the big question, right? Time Equities is not the first developer to engage with art. I think the thing that fundamentally makes us different from other developers that are engaging with the arts, and that this is true of our residency program certainly, is that the mission of Art-in-Buildings is to create a platform for emerging and mid-career artists, expand the audience for contemporary art, and make our properties more interesting places to live, work, do business, etc. I think that platform comes first because we see ourselves as the support structure for promoting the artists. There are other incidents where you see developers trying to use the artists as the platform in order to achieve something, and whether that's press or cool or masking something, they're trying to use the art to accomplish that. Time Equities is not trying to do that. We have resources and one of those

resources happens to be space, that happens to be a resource that artists really need, and so whether that's studio space, which I think is critical, or it's exhibition space, or it's space to scale up a project.

Another thing that makes us different is that I'm here. I'm a full-time staff member, my background is in the arts, and I am the point of contact for all of the artists that we engage with. I translate best practice ways of working with artists to the real estate and development teams and then take the real estate language which I've learned having worked with Time Equities for five years and translate that back to the artist. Then we are all hopefully on the same page.

We have at the top of our company someone who is a true patron of the arts, and there is a top-down vision for engaging artists. The company's investment in my department concretizes that strong position for the arts and I hope that the results are projects that are positive for the artists and for ourselves. I'm not saying that this is utopian, but it really does make our buildings better places. That is something that public art has proven, it can make a public site a more interesting place to be in, we're trying to apply that to privately owned spaces.

LS: In 2007 Lebbeus Woods stated, "If there's going to be another movement, another direction in architecture, it has to engage people differently. Other than saying, here, look at this, isn't this amazing? It has to interactively involve them other than as spectators, or, as a 'society of the spectacle.' It has to engage them as creators." Artist-in-Construction residency seems to be a means to presently activate the future. What's next?

JL: I have to be vague because it's not official, but there is a tentative next that would be another skyline changing skyscraper, not in New York City, where we would hope to engage artists from the very beginning.

50 West has been in the works for so long that, even though I've been at Time Equities for five years, everything was already set — they hadn't broken ground, but the project was already determined by the time I got to the company.

This new project has begun in my tenure so I have been able to sit in on meetings and understand what's going on from the beginning. Also doing anything a second time is a lot easier. I think we'll be able to scale up. And whether that means more artists or longer residencies, I don't actually know yet, but definitely, it's in the works to do it again.