Performing Arts AIR Meeting@TPAM
Keynote Address: Creative Expression, Social Justice and AIR
February 15, 2012, 19:30–21:30 at Yokohama Creativecity Center (YCC) 3F
Speaker: Todd Lester (Executive Director, Global Arts Corps)

Lester: [Solves a computer problem] Hi, everyone. Good evening, and thank you for your patience with the technology. I thought I would give the book out, right before I started tinkering, to at least give you something to read.

My name is Todd Lester. I have an official title, which is the Executive Director of the Global Arts Corp. Before I begin to tell you about the Global Arts Corp and to engage in the theme of "creative expression, social justice and artist-in-residence," I wanted to first say thank you again to TPAM for having me. We've actually been talking all day long: we started at 10 o'clock this morning with the session, and then the round table in the afternoon. So I feel like I've gotten to engage with you all quite a bit and I'm really happy to know you all, to meet you all.

Before I get into the theme, I would be remiss not to take this publicity opportunity, especially with some friends from Youkobo and Tokyo Wonder Site in the audience. Just to say that later this year there is a general meeting of the ResArtis network, and that is October 25th to 28th, and it's in Tokyo at Tokyo Wonder Site. Murata-san, here from Youkobo, is also on the board of ResArtis. It will be about four to five days of discussions on artist-in-residence. So please put that in your calendar and take a look at the dates afterwards if you like.

OK, so now let's get to the theme of tonight, which is "creative expression, social justice and artist-in-residence." This morning I had the good fortune to speak with the artist, Kyohei Sakaguchi, and again in the afternoon at the round table discussion with the residency managers from the region, but also globally. In Mr. Sakaguchi's case, it seems that he has taken artist-in-residence to a whole new level creating, or at least evoking, a new government. And that is melding the formally clear categories of artist and institution into one new entity. Mr. Sakaguchi does not seek to go on residency as I've heard artists say but to reclaim the notion of residing, living and inhabiting.

Kyohei said at one point that it's not "cool" to take money from the government. Well, others in the room argued that none of our programs would work without these funds or the similar funds that come from corporate support. And I thought at that moment somehow his point was missed because I feel that Sakaguchi's argument is that there is a surplus, simply stated. That we are not using all that is ours—public space was his example—and that by not using it there is a waste in the system.

Governments, banks, corporations, real estate developers and investors all stake their claim to the field of residency. What Kyohei and other artists, who create micro-residencies in their homes, are doing is holding of formal space. They are making sure that it remains complicated: something that cultural exchange will always be, something that is in a large part beneath the radar of, let's call it, "state-to-state cultural diplomacy." And for the very reason that artists are reclaiming this space of residency, I remain hopeful because it is this intersection where I believe that creative expression and social justice are crossed together as we talked about the artist-in-residence model.

I'd also like to mention that sometimes artist-in-residence is questioned by other, say, vocations or other demographics of people, and I wanted to share with you a call tonight by a cultural worker Cristina Farinha about this topic. She says, "Artists, as a highly educated workforce, are generally considered the least visible group of migrants and those who are neither unwelcome nor seen as a problem by the host society. They are quantitatively few, though often important as gatekeepers for other migrants, and usually engage in gradual transitions; from intermittent stays at various intervals to permanent settlement." I share this with you because the next thing I want to do is to talk a little bit about my own work, and it is truly about this intersecting between the artist mobility and human mobility, more broadly. I feel that the artist mobility is merely a subset of the broader human mobility.

So let me tell you a little bit about some of the work that I've been doing. I know that some of you were here this morning, so I don't want to speak too much of freeDimensional, but I'll speak very briefly of it to show you a continuum of experimentation that I've been working on at this intersection of artist residency and social justice. The first is an organization that is now seven years old called "freeDimensional," and what freeDimensional is is a network of artist residency in almost eighty countries. Several hundred residencies participate, and what they do is that they empty and offer their surplus bedrooms to artists and cultural workers when they are in distress.

There is something ironic about the artist residency sector I learned some eight years ago when I started freeDimensional: And that is that history tells us that artists and cultural workers have always been a part of societal change, and yet now there is this very robust artist residency sector; however you really can not imagine an artist who is in danger or in some form of distress actually being able to enter a residency at the very time it would be convenient, there would need to be a sort of interruption in the system.

So when I approached this irony or this problem as I saw it, I sought how to create that interruption. And for several years now, what I have attempted to do with my colleagues, advisors and supporters is to create an example in the residency field whereby artist residencies would open their doors and make available their surplus bedrooms to cultural workers in distress at the very moment of their distress. And for that we attempt to turn around or open up a residency apartment for someone in distress within a week to three week's time from when we learned about their situation.

And now, as I mentioned, several hundred residencies are participating, and what freeDimensional is supposed to do as I designed it is actually to go out of business after ten years: well, it's about seven years into that. What we hope is that it actually changes the face of the residency sector so that it won't always be necessary for an organization to ask a residency to do this but the residencies will have their antenna out to learn about individuals, even in their very local communities, to produce their support and their hosting so that we could actually go out of business as an organization, which is under way.

So now that freeDimensional is on autopilot and it can kind of manage itself and has its own destiny of obsolescence, I, then as one of its creators, am getting restless as, you know, all creative types tend to do. I haven't taken the approach of starting a government like Kyohei, but I did get curious to try other things. Now I'm going to tell you about two of those new things that I have gotten involved in since I took a step away from freeDimensional. I have a few little videos that I want to show you. I'm going to show you the sort of atmosphere in New York City, where I live, of the last few months that has grabbed my attention.

[Video: "Occupy Wall Street" protest on November 17, 2011]

Without belaboring the point that the "Occupy Wall Street" movement is a movement that has many many artists in its ranks, what I would like to tell you about all these months of unemployment for me, when I was able to visit Wall Street and see this activity happening, but also when the first snowfall of the winter happened very early in late October, is that it became apparent that these activists—these people who wanted to be involved in this movement—would actually need a place to sleep to continue through the winter.

As you can imagine, one of the things that appealed to me about this was, actually, the problem of it. It doesn't really matter, I guess, how you feel about the movement, but it was very interesting for me to think about how to actually create a hosting mechanism that could be useful and supportive to these activists in New York: a model that could also be replicable in other cities around the world.

You might not be surprised that some of the first volunteer hosting locations were, in addition to many households and many private homes, several art spaces such as the Flux Factory in New York or Capacete in Rio de Janeiro. So we were not surprised that art spaces were interested in this model as well, and after several months of setting up the model, now it is totally integrated in the Occupy website and system. It is a housing committee, a working group, and there is an online system that matches people wanting to be hosted with people wanting to host in their homes.

So as you have already guessed, I'm someone who likes to figure out these sorts of systems, but also I'm interested in the language we use around artist residency. I like to stretch it a little bit. I'd like to talk about something a little bit broader that I would say is "critical" hosting, living in and inhabiting communities.

Now I want to show you this second thing that I have been involved in. Actually someone came along and said, "Hey, we'd like to give you a job," which was very surprising to me, to figure out a new system.

[Video: *Truth in Translation* overview]
http://vimeo.com/963830

So, for the last 20 or 30 minutes, I've taken you on a sort of journey along my own professional arc, and therefore—you've stayed so long—now I'm going to ask you to indulge my semantics when I say that what this theatre project is is also something about living in a community, something related to artist residency, even though I won't call it "artist residency" specifically.

Playwright and artistic director, Micheal Lessac, decided to take his idea to South Africa right at the same moment as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was holding its public manifestations. He had an idea to create an ensemble cast, a theatre company, representing all sides of the conflict that you could do something that perhaps the law could not do.

What he didn't realize was that the play would spark a movement, if you will, or a reaction everywhere it was seen, and that he would have no choice, as the years passed by, but to form a larger vehicle and organization to hold the activity of the play because there were many requests to have other countries' stories told in a similar ensemble way.

This is where I come in. Micheal invited me to help move the play, *Truth in Translation*, into an organization that is now called "Global Arts Corps." This had to do with really his seeing that I could take an idea—the idea that started freeDimensional—and move it into an organizational format, and he asked if I would be willing to help him do the same thing for his idea.

As you know from my words in the book I have given you, the *Truth in Translation* piece has moved around the world, to areas that have also been in conflict—Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Kosovo, Cambodia—but actually that was not the reason that the play moved. It was not the hope that those locations would invite a similar process. The reason was actually different: Michael believed that it would be very hard for the South African actors to perform the piece first in South Africa. He believed that it would be necessary for them to build their confidence in another location before coming home to do the play.

So when he started looking for places to tour the play, people—his peers in the theatre community and the Reconciliation community—said, "Well, why not take it to places that also have experienced something similar," such as Northern Ireland, Kosovo, and these other locations that I mentioned.

When they showed their work in these countries, they were invited back to come and create a similar process, so quickly Michael and the organization had to think, "Well, how would we do this?" And it became essential, if you will, that the South African actors and cast would be a part of taking the process back to the countries where they had taken their theatre piece.

In order to do that, though, it was actually necessary to frame the process. Michael had an idea that it was important for South Africa, but he wasn't thinking of the process as something that was replicable. So again, in order to be able to take this initiative into Northern Ireland and have both sides of the Catholic and Protestant to tell their story, the process would need to be articulated.

And it was at this point where it became apparent that having been in South Africa first was very essential to the process because actually nowhere in our recent history has there been such an example as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of a society allowing their legal system to prioritize restorative justice instead of retributive justice.

And one ingredient that is essential to restorative justice is dialogue: the airing of people's different stories that they come together and sort of hold a space in history. And as you can imagine, theatre is a perfect tool to allow that dialogue.

Here you see on the screen that there is a goal of doing this for fifteen years. Honestly, that has something to do with Michael's age. He is in his early seventies—I'm not supposed to tell that to anyone—but you see something similar that he also has an idea to do this for certain amount of time, sort of like freeDimensional—we had the idea of ten years to do something that you could actually change the course of how we talk and think about reconciliation.

As you saw in the video, a part of the model—the artistic design of the first piece—was that it would look at the lives of the translators who translated the testimonies in the thirteen different languages of South Africa. In each of the locations where we are going into production, we are looking for a similar vehicle for voice. They won't always be translators, because in many of the countries where we are now working, there are not Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. But you do have, let's say, minority voices. For example, in Kosovo the piece will be told from the viewpoint of the Roma community: the community that has somehow been set apart from the differences.

For this process, it's important to say that the casting and the script's development actually happens simultaneously. His idea is that by casting—usually auditioning with up to 300 potential actors and interviewing them, capturing their stories—you start to have different pieces of history. And the writers, who also represent different communities, are part of the casting process so that the play is actually written at the same time that they are meeting the potential actors for the play.

And it has remained the practice that the production is first debuted outside of the country where it is sourced. This has now both the practical function of the actors' gaining confidence with their story—it's such a personal story that they like to perform it outside their own country first—and the secondary benefit that it allows the process of *Truth in Translation* to be seen in more and more locations: now it's reached about eleven countries.

I just want to read very quickly the mission and vision. Now that the play moved into becoming an organization, we needed to say exactly what it is that we are attempting to do. The mission of Global Arts Corps is "to offer innovative strategies for communities in conflict to process the past in order to thrive in the future," and the vision is "to be an indispensable human resource for transforming violent conflict through perceptual change."

On the screen here, you see a picture of Mostar in the Balkans. This is a town where a very old bridge that connected the Serbian and Muslim communities was bombed or exploded, and in the last decade they have rebuilt this historic bridge. However, it is still true that the Muslims and Serbs don't really intermingle, and this bridge actually still serves as a divider rather than a connector for their communities. When the production would go to Mostar, this issue also was present: how would you do a performance for both communities?

And because nothing can be easy, especially with Michael, my colleague, he decided that the only way to do justice to the situation would be to erect a stage on the river where a simultaneous projection of the play on the stage would be projected on both walls of the fortress that the bridge connects so that both communities would have a way to see it front on.

So I would like to finish my PowerPoint and formal presentation, and with the permission of the organizers... I actually have a short video, it's about eight or ten minutes of footage of them actually performing on this very precarious waterborne stage, and I would like to show that after I finish talking, if that's OK...? OK, and then, after that, we can go into a question-and-answer if you like—we can talk about all the things that I'll have mentioned tonight, and I thank you for your patience in allowing me to take on this many different issues.

This shows you a little bit how we are working in different countries. In Kosovo, we are really engaging in three communities: the Serbs, Albanians and Romas. In Istanbul, it's again three: the Armenians, Turkish and Kurdish. And I guess most regionally close to this meeting would be our new project in Cambodia, which I wanted to speak about for just a minute.

What we are doing in Cambodia is quite different because it doesn't have to do with two war infections who have no calm down or something like that. It actually has to do with the fact that many of the Khmer Rouge generation are aging out. They are passing away, and in this society there has been something of a veil of silence, where people haven't really talked about that generation, especially to their children or grandchildren.

However, you have had examples of attempt at reconciliation. For example, there is even, by the government's hand, an online receptacle for testimonies. Similar to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—not exactly, but similar in the spirit.

There is a model that came from South Africa, but when we start to work in a new country, that model has to be modified. For example, in Turkey, where we were working, there was already a preexisting Kurdish theatre company that we were able to start working with. Different from the South Africa experience, where we helped to convene the representative company.

So in working across generations, from youth to an older generation, in Cambodia, it was necessary to engage a particular binocular that the youth would respect but also that the older generation would respect. And that is circus performance. By working with a long-standing and very professional circus company as well as a country-wide youth network, we were able to start to go into production in Cambodia.

OK, that's the end of the PowerPoint presentation, and at this point I actually would like to switch over to the video and have us watch that together, and then we'll go into discussion after that.

[Video: *Truth in Translation* in Mostar]
http://vimeo.com/2773595

Thank you. What you saw in the last part of this video was one of the dialogue sessions where the actors actually engage youth groups in every location. This is not a part of the creative process of planning for the local production, but it is something that ideologically we would do in every location. So our idea is that the beginning of the process is really pulling together an ensemble company or cast, but we are also thinking about how even the cameramen—we do typically four-camera coverage of these pieces for archival purposes—would be from different communities. That sort of representation goes all the way down the pipeline of the activity, and actually creates many discussions after the performances—with people in general, but we really like to do that with youth most importantly.

So I would welcome questions and answers or moreover discussion, but before I would do that, I would like to say thank you for translating me. I know that's a heavy job and a lot of work. Thank you very much.

Translator: Thank you.

Organizer: Thank you. We have about 30 minutes for questions and answers. For example, he mentioned "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" several times, and do all of you know what it is? OK? Question can be also about that kind of things.

Translator: He is asking if he can add an explanation.

Organizer: It is a good idea.

Lester: It was the framework commission for truth and reconciliation that was opted for in South Africa at the end of apartheid. I would argue that that sort of thing only gets to happen at these historical moments, amazing moments, when you have a leadership like Nelson Mandela but also Archbishop Desmond Tutu: very charismatic and long-suffering figures who were able to invite the country to take part in such a process.

Question 1 (the organizer): Are there any questions? If I may, I would like to ask a question. You said that it was a bit different from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Cambodia, and could you explain some more about the difference?

Lester: Sure. Well, I guess again I will go back to the essential. I mean this is an idea, this is a model for reconciliation. It happens to be my new job, so I'm also learning the history of it, and the best I can tell is that there was something very magical, very important, that happened where this piece of theatre was developed alongside an amazing moment in history. So the ability for *Truth in Translation* and Global Arts Corps to move around the world has to do with how it came about, how it was created. And again I would say that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa is extraordinary. There are other examples: there is something called "Gacaca" that happened in Rwanda after the genocide, which is akin to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but I think what I would point out is that in South Africa it was very formal, and then you have everything along that continuum.

So there were and are truth and reconciliation activities in Cambodia—I mentioned that there is an online process where testimony can be stored and people can view it—but the argument here is that people don't view it as literally as they would watch TV, and the South African activity happened on TV. So what we will attempt to do is—because we are just now starting the process there, invited by the country-wide youth network and the circus company—to create a performance. I mean it will take months leading up to the performance because the casting, as I mentioned, where the story is created, has to do with the youth interviewing their elders. And we, as you might imagine, are going to engage all of the technology that is available to us. The youth will actually be using cameras to interview their elders, and we will attempt to link some of those interviews with some of the testimonies that are online, to really engage the youth who make those films to recirculate some of the online testimonies. So we will be simultaneously experimenting with a theatre production as well as the social media angle so that the theatre production happens but there is also broader envelope in which it happens.

I would also add, if there is not a question straight away, that it's also important for me personally to say how ambivalent this work can be because it doesn't escape me that I come from a country, for example the United States, that has not reconciled with its past. Perhaps the largest genocide in history books was the Native Americans: I think around sixteen million were killed. We also have a tainted history around slavery. So I want to put out there, "This is something that I believe in," and it's also something that... maybe it is the same as the production: maybe it's a lot easier to do it in another location. I find it would be very difficult to do in my own country. That could lead to a different discussion, but I just wanted to point out that that is always in the back of my mind.

Organizer: Thank you.

Question 2: Thank you for your inspiring presentation. I'm Nan van Houte from Holland. I've been working in Cambodia exactly on the same topic of the non-communication between generations about the genocide, and I wondered if you—because I saw you making your production in Battambang—are planning to tour the country with your production and how you plan to do that, or will it only be performed in Battambang? I ask you because we experienced that there is a lot of need for art in the provinces, where there is no theatre infrastructure at all, so we used a mobile platform, mobile stage to tour the country.

Lester: Thank you for the question. Since you've worked there, you probably know the groups: the youth peacebuilding network and the Phare circus company. They have longer names that I'm happy to share if you like. One is that the youth network is countrywide, and the intention would be that we would work and take the production where they would enable and invite us to take it. The second is that the circus company asked the organization Global Arts Corps if they would make a five-year commitment to doing this work. All I can say, because it's just at the beginning, is that Michael agreed to that request. He is very dedicated to keeping that, and now we set about the hard part, which is to raise the funding to be able to take it all the way to production. And I would just say that that's the reason why for a while we

stopped to finish editing a film, a long-form film that has some of the same footage, because we feel like that that film, which captures the whole touring of the first South African production, will help us to raise the money to be able to put on some of these next productions.

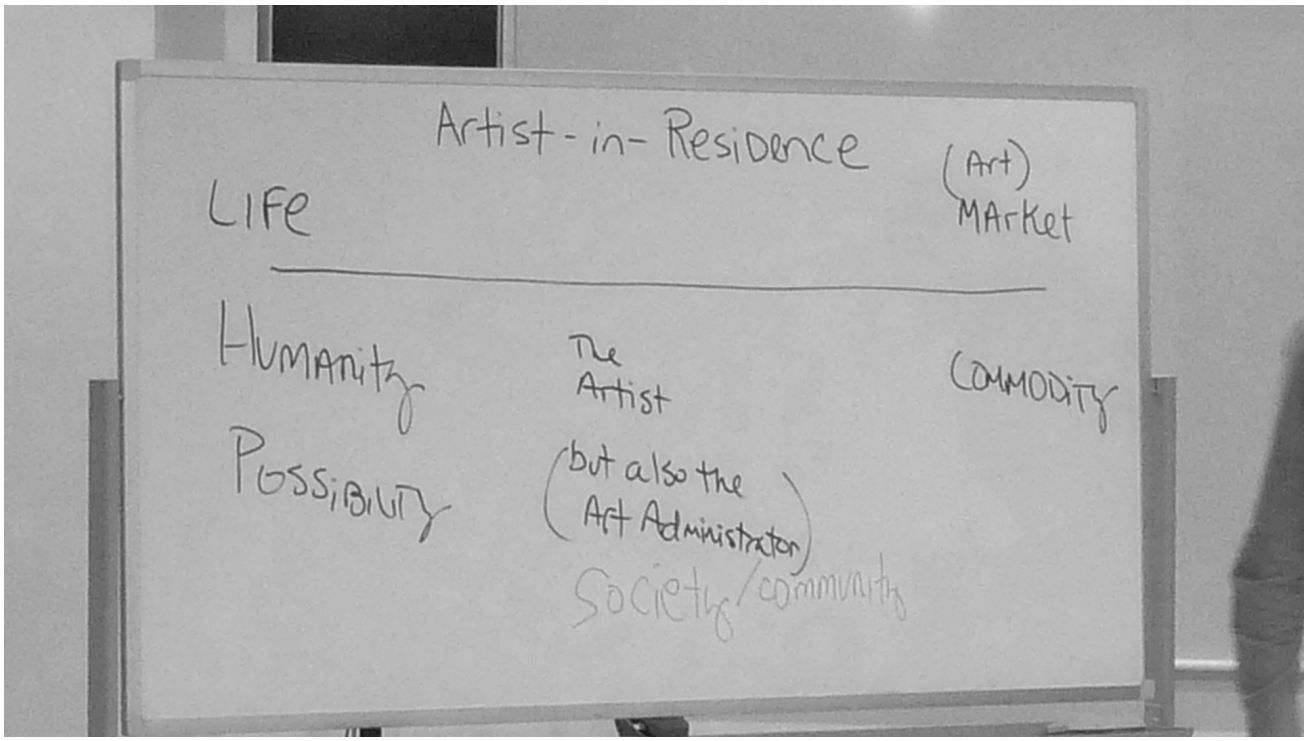
Question 3 (sic): Thank you for sharing the project you have shown us. It was really fantastic, I think, and I was wondering, I think you were talking about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for you are American, you have to remember it would be difficult for you to do it in the United States, and I was wondering if the project you were talking about, freeDimensional, and that artist-in-residence like homeless people or the people who commit crimes—offenders maybe?—they probably need a place to express themselves and then to open the residency to the people in need for that kind of situation. That would be really difficult, I think, and so it's very realistic situation you might face the problem, I think. So did you have any difficult, maybe situation, to face? Do you understand...?

Lester: Thank you for the question, and I know that we are nearing 9:30, so I was thinking about, you know, maybe just thinking about some closing remarks, and you asked me a perfect question for that. There is always difficulty. One of the main difficulties, going back to freeDimensional, is getting past the fear that, say, a residency administrator would experience in thinking, "Can I do this? Can I host a cartoon journalist from Cameroon who has been in jail in my artist residency? Will it disrupt to the extent that we cannot function, or will it enliven to the extent that it's a new space that is magical and brings a new dialogue between the other artists-in-residence?"

You always have this, you know, fear at one end and a possibility at the other end of the spectrum, and so I think that definitely in some of the three projects that I've talked to you about there is... that effects all of them. There is a seeming impossibility, and then there is this amazing potential. To my age right now, you know, I've remained pretty optimistic and liked to push this possibility. But I don't want to be so vain of me. I mean, I think what Kyohei was talking about earlier today was the same thing. It's, to some, a crazy notion to start a government, but actually he is pushing, say, the envelope to an extent to help us think differently about some things.

And if I may—I asked to have a drawing board, which is behind me—while you are translating, I'm going to draw something to close with.

[Draws while the translator translates]



I hope I'm not getting too meta... or macro... I mean, to give a very specific example, imagine that many of the stakeholders for freeDimensional but also those that we have seen in *Truth in Translation* that critical social issues are always there: issues of depression, issues of fatigue... So I mean we've definitely had cases where we attempted to place an artist or culture worker into a residency and the trauma that they had experienced interfered with the smooth nature of the artist residency. And that, you know, goes back to knowing your business, knowing what you do. What we do with freeDimensional is to place artists, activists, cultural workers who can function in an artist residency into an artist residency. And once a twice, we've made miscalculations where we found that we placed someone and it probably wasn't

the best situation for them. But I also really trust the art administrators, people who run these residencies, because they too are quick to assess that this might not work. And then we work with them to find a different detour to the situation.

And let me just explain what I drew on the board. I'm listening to the specific questions, but I'm always going back to this big picture orientation, and also the one that Kyohei reminded me of today when I saw the similarity between his project and my project of freeDimensional. This is a continuum, I think, and the subject that we are talking about is obviously artist-in-residence, but who does the artist-in-residence? Well, I forgot one...

[Adds "Society/community" on the board while the translator translates]

So this is a continuum, and our topic is artist-in-residence, something that we all are interested in, myself very much so. And it pertains to the artist who does it, and also the art administrator who many of us are, and sometimes we are also artists, so we get two layers, and then it also pertains to society or the local community. So I think there are these three stakeholders. And because artist-in-residence is within this big thing that we call the art world, and because there is a side of that art world that is the art market, then what is just predictable, if you will, is that things are commodified. You can say that artwork is commodified, but you can also say that concepts are commodified or more and more narrowed, more and more focused.

So what is predictable is that the market and the commodification... who does this? Well, money does it, capital does it, a government does it, people buying art do it, all these things happen together, and this is a very normal predictable pull. It pulls on this, and it pulls it into specificity. It wants the artist-in-residence concept to be one thing that is very vocational. What I would say is that there is the other end of that spectrum that is more about mobility in general: human mobility that is more about life. That is more about that possibility that I think Kyohei was seeing when he said, "You know, I'm just gonna start a government. That's what I'm gonna do. And it is a residence."

So I guess that's where I would close. It's to just to say that it's predictable, we should not be surprised, that the market and the commodifying sort of force would pull the notion of artist-in-residence towards something very specific and very manageable, because a building with a bedroom in it can be called an artist residency. That is very manageable. You can describe it in one line. Artists and art administrators, because I think we are pretty creative ourselves, we are always going to pull in another direction, which is the direction of possibility, the direction of experimentation, and the direction of defying the category itself. And that is where I find a lot of hope, actually. Thank you very much.

Organizer: Thank you very much. We are running out of time, so this is the end of the session, but Todd stays until Sunday, and his contact information is on the contact list, so please contact or ask a question to him if you like. We are also planning his one-to-one workshop, so please contact me if you are interested. Thank you very much.