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WORK/PLAY



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RETREATING

JUST TO TURN OUR EYES UPSIDE DOWN

THERE'S A RECURRING daydream I have: I'm unpacking a small suitcase (in this daydream I'm also low-maintenance, a minimalist) in a room inside a picturesque villa, the bronzed hills of Tuscany just outside the window. There is a small desk, upon which sits a vase holding a few branches plucked from an olive tree. They arch outward to graze the wood of the desk; a pen and paper wait expectantly nearby. I sit down to write. It is *always* golden hour.

A prevailing axiom within creative culture these days is “everyone’s got it.” “It,” of course, being creativity. Evangelists of this belief say we’re all creative—or at least we’re born that way—

and that with practice and some discipline, we have the capacity to tap into the well no matter how deep or dusty. But the truth is that time, space, and the right combination of contributing social, financial, and cultural factors ultimately make creativity, and creation a viable option (or not). Many would-be, could-be artists might be otherwise engaged.

The demands and/or conventions of waking life can make creativity a real challenge. They may *also* provide a helpful symbolic foe against which to rally our imagination of the could-be-would-be possibilities. For example, when I'm feeling my most romantic (I'm not immune), I think of my work as a researcher, curator, and essayist. I may flinch at the last one (writing it here is a plucky sort of experiment intended to make me quiver), but that's what feels most right, deep down. I say deep down because 75% of the time I'm a copywriter and creative strategist. I write brand decks and website copy, and help businesses cultivate their values and missions. I even tend to enjoy it.

The attempted reconciliation of these separate writerly identities is a timeless negotiation—a rebellious and craving creative spirit rattling around, chafing against the bars of a more traditional profession, imagining what might be possible were circumstances different. Nothing promises the power to pull apart those bars like a change of scenery and disengagement from everyday responsibilities. I fantasize about it often.

This impulse—no doubt shared by others—might help explain the recent explosion of creative residencies scattered around the world. Mythic destinations of escape, creation, and communion, the artist retreat possesses mystical powers, you can't help but conclude. If you've had a funny feeling that everyone you know is spending their summers honing their craft at an indecently photogenic Italian villa, you, too, have taken note of the trend. The promise of somewhere beautiful, somewhere dreamlike—somewhere with a stated mission of providing the time and space needed to do “really good work”—is more compelling than ever.

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While the trend is certainly timely, the history and mythology of the artist retreat traces back to a phenomenon around the turn of the twentieth century. Beginning in the mid-to-late 1800s and into the early 1900s, so-called artist colonies were popping up across Europe and the United States. Many artists eagerly left the rapidly industrializing cities to seek utopian landscapes and kindred company, forming communities that existed outside mainstream cultural and social economies. The French hamlet of Barbizon called to Europe's open-air painters from the 1850s onward, the village of Worpswede in Germany attracted artists as early as 1889, the Provincetown Art Colony sprang to life in the summer of 1899, two colonies around Woodstock, NY—Byrdcliffe and Maverick—popped up in 1902 and 1904, respectively, followed by the MacDowall Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire in 1907. Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, NY, was chartered by founders Spencer Trask and his wife Katrina in 1900 to be a place of “rest and refreshment [for] authors, painters, sculptors, musicians and other artists both men and women, few in number but chosen for their creative gifts.” Its doors opened to artists in 1926, after both had died, and eventually welcomed the likes of James Baldwin, Leonard Bernstein, Truman Capote, Patricia Highsmith, and Sylvia Plath. The Bauhaus began as a self-contained school first in Weimar, then in Dessau, Germany.

But how did these seemingly utopian colonies function and flourish? Most were, in fact, supported by wealthy patrons whose funds afforded participants amenities like lodging, studio access, even daily meals. These perks were a huge boon for the visiting artists—both established and fledgling. Alleviated of the usual quotidian Worries, the focus might finally be on the Work.

“INTERESTINGLY, STUDIES HAVE ALSO SUGGESTED THAT BOREDOM MIGHT BE A SECRET INGREDIENT FOR CREATIVITY.”

By now, we've likely all made note that changing our surroundings and routine presents the type of perspectival shift from which innovation and newness spring. In his essay “Nature,” Ralph Waldo Emerson suggests we “[t]urn the eyes upside down, by looking at the landscape through your legs.” Interestingly, studies have also suggested that boredom might be a secret ingredient for creativity. In 2014, a study published in the *Creativity Research Journal* found that daydreaming—that spacey byproduct of boredom—resulted in novel ideas and increased creativity. It's safe to assume there's a threshold here: A surplus of sustained boredom may not be too good a thing. Nevertheless, retreat settings seem to offer just the right blend of unfamiliar stimulation coupled with idle repose. In 1900, upon arriving to the art colony at Worpswede, a young Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, “How large the eyes become here!” Perhaps he was looking at the landscape through his legs.

Over time, art shifted from an early “patronage period” to a “market period.” Art and artists were commoditized and creativity professionalized. The Creative and Cultural economies are the most formidable frontiers of modern economic growth. In 2019, the arts and culture sector contributed more value to the United States GDP than travel and tourism, agricultural, and transportation. Billions and billions of dollars (some \$800 billion, to be exact) come from artistic and cultural products—things like movies, television, video games, museums, design, and architecture. Meanwhile, the global startup economy was worth nearly \$3 trillion as of 2019, a 20% rise in just two years. As consumer industries become saturated with a surplus of options, brands and businesses will vye for customer affections



however they can. “Good taste” becomes a market asset to stand out—be it on a shelf, in an ad, or in our inbox. In order to do that, brands and businesses need talented people—the storytellers, imagemakers, designers, and creative visionaries. The fields of inspiration, imagination, and creativity are rarely siloed from profit-oriented arenas. Today, the lines between art and commerce are more blurred than ever.

Many contemporary residencies offer their resources at no cost in exchange for keeping a piece of work artists produce during their stay; Most collect application fees; some function more like institutions, with enrollment costing hundreds, even thousands of dollars. On ResArtis, a global network of arts residencies, those with fees outnumber those without three-to-one. In terms of admission, it can be a walled garden: applications ask for CVs, work samples, and references. Having been to creative residencies in the past makes getting into future residencies easier. Of the more than 700 vetted residencies spread across 85 countries listed

on ResArtis, only 121 are wheelchair accessible. When it comes to art—elitism, access, and privilege still play recurring roles.

It's alongside these complex issues that modern day residencies emerge and engage. The Djerassi Resident Artists Program, founded in the early 1960s on a 583-acre ranch at the foot of the Santa Cruz Mountains, proclaims that its artists are "awarded the gifts of time + space." But the gifts don't stop there. "Here, in a setting of extraordinary natural beauty," its homepage reads, "artists can just BE—to dream, dare, collaborate and create. Ideas are shared around the dinner table. Collaborations erupt organically. Work that couldn't have existed any other way takes shape, catches fire, and becomes real." Sounds rather fabulous, if a bit fantastical.

These days—with things moving as quickly as they are, connectivity as incessant and formidable a force as it is, and money as valued as it always has been—creativity can often be seen as an asset of output, productivity, and conquest rather than process, contemplation, and connectivity. It's no wonder aspirational art residencies are more popular than ever. As for me, I'm trying to save my pennies. I'm imagining ways I can carve out time from a freelance schedule where "paid vacation" is—how do I put this?—not a thing. Should I manage to apply and be accepted, I hope to continue the exploration and see the lofty missions in action, meet other people in pursuit of peace and productivity, and investigate how we can do better. I hope to witness the only thing I know for certain when it comes to all this: that nature, and the landscapes we invite or challenge ourselves to disappear into, have the fullest might beyond anything else to transform us. That, at least, is no illusion or myth. *

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EXPLORING PERMANENCE IN
A WORLD OF RAPID CHANGE.



THIS ISSUE IS ABOUT
WORK AND PLAY—HOW THEY
OVERLAP AND INTERSECT,
AND OUR RELATIONSHIPS
TO THESE THEMES, BOTH
SEPARATELY AND AS A WHOLE.

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