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Been there, haven't done that.

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Predictive content. You look at bikes online and then Amazon tries to sell you the same bike, similar bicycles, and every accessory that might adorn it for the next couple days. Don't look up diabetes because your mother's friend has it, you'll start getting ads for advice, medication, and related helpful stuff. It's what the internet does.

"Familiar and similar" is comfortable. The art world is a pretty regulated place. Museums, galleries, biennials, and art fairs rarely make people angry or challenged. People prefer familiarity and reinforced held beliefs and while there are more people visiting art museums than ever before, the art is less challenging and less interesting, and the number of people who call themselves artists is at an all-time high. Curators too. Creativity is valued in our society as long as it confirms or rejects within acceptable limits.

The Fellowship program, the focus of this publication, is the result of observation, contrarianism, frustration, and resolution. Observation and frustration about how art is taught and the role it plays in society, and contrarianism because questioning and challenging is the basis of creativity. apexart started in 1994 as the art world was getting more commercial. Expanding university art programs were a financial juggernaut for universities and collecting art became available to a much

larger group. Many new galleries were opening and as the art world grew, more people depended on it for a living and it was becoming very professional and very serious. Really serious. Really boring art became really serious art. I was confused and the result was apexart.

Our Fellowship provides a time out from the familiar. It reminds people of the time before they were “focused, professional, and serious.” Doing the kinds of things that aren’t validated by the media or the art world as hip, cool, or trendy. The kind of things you stopped doing because you got older, “focused,” scared, and serious.

Art referencing art is exclusive; new experiences, new activities, and meeting new people increases tolerance and allows new ideas to be considered and incorporated into ones work and/or life – especially in a place of anonymity. Feeling uncomfortable makes you feel less uncomfortable in the future. Conquering a situation gives you confidence. Reconsidering is invaluable. Maybe there are too many arts-related activities available for people who were networking or career building. Taking people out of their comfort zone, away from home, and having them participate in all kinds of new activities is creatively generative. And then sending them to three or four activities per day over a one-month period creates a behavioral change that often puts them at a higher level of productivity and creativity when they get home. We send our past Fellows one-month, six-months, and one-year questionnaires after their Fellowship is over to ask about this and other aspects of the program. Some responses are excerpted here, as well as portions of the Fellows’ online journal.

This program began about 18 years ago as a traditional studio program. The kind where an organization asked an art world 'notable' to recommend an up-and-coming aggressive young artist who was probably getting too many opportunities already. It quickly felt like a lost opportunity to bring someone to another place/culture, put them in a studio box for a month to produce an exhibition and then send them home. What was the point in having someone make the same work in a different place? Residency programs can be promotional opportunities or learning opportunities and those that consist mainly of inviting curators and others to meet the resident artist are for promotional opportunities and not the creative process. We didn't want to become their gallerist or their network hotel. There are many programs that do that and do it well. We wanted to have fun, challenge us, and the Fellow, and actually help creative people be more creative.

T.J. McLachlan - Vancouver, Canada, to New York City, 2014
Before coming to NY I had a few conversations about the gruff attitude of people who call NY home. So far I've been nothing but struck by the kindness of New Yorkers, and when they have been less than endearing they have at least felt sincere. For lunch I met with Eric and his colleague Raquiba; such kind and fun people. I later did an orientation for NYCares, a group who coordinates volunteer opportunities throughout the city. Their business model is smart, allowing people to really engage in their own city, but the people I was taking this class with were hilariously engaged. I was stifling my laughter at their excitement to participate. The instructor asked if anyone wanted to share his or her intentions in volunteering. I assumed that it would be an awkward silence for a while before the instructor would pry a response out of us, but people were talking over each other to share why they were there. It really was inspiring.

We're in an age of celebrity with the art world is as effected as ever. Name recognition is more important than the work we do and more valuable. Socially aware aggressive people seemed to have learned how to secure opportunities that might have gone to less socially adept, but more creative people in the past. Was this the case? Were the right people not getting opportunities? Was everything becoming "big" in a way that affected the "small," leaving little space for the unfamiliar?

On the internet, the more you look, the less you see. Let your browser get to know you and it becomes an overbearing friend reinforcing your "interests" and making you feel that everyone is interested in the same things you are - until you're sitting next to someone in a Starbucks and see that your home page is not the same as the person next to you. You've been informationally cut off. Slowly, insidiously, it has been narrowing what you see of the "other" while emphasizing the familiar. This is particularly unfortunate since exposure to the new and different creates acceptance and understanding and stimulates thought. Look around. Are you reinforcing this comfort for yourself or are you anxious about it? Or bored by it? If you are, you might really be an artist. Or at least someone who wants more.

apexart's Fellowship is counter-predictive. You will not be sent to openings, art museums, or art panels. Our Fellows are directed to activities they don't expect, never wanted to do, and sometimes make them nervous. We explain that they will be bored, lonely, depressed, exhilarated, challenged, and/or excited on a daily basis. The activities

are incredibly diverse, and while we don't know which meeting, activity, or situation will have what effect, we know that the accumulated effect is quite transformative. We give people raw material. Rather than going to a performance art event as an artist, we might send you to the Federal Court building to sit in on a criminal trial or an improvisation class. The art performance event is someone else's work whereas the trial has real performances and real actors. There's real tension and a real unknown. Its raw material. Paint it, social-practice it, digest it, or just watch it.

Shefalee Jain - Delhi, India, to New York City, 2015

Was your experience of apexart's Fellowship different than what you expected?

Somewhat different. The website had prepared me in some sense with the interviews of the former Fellows and the sample itinerary. But the actual experience of being there was both more exciting and challenging than I had expected.

Did you find your Fellowship engaging overall? Intellectually challenging?

Yes, very much. I was spending time by myself after a very long time. That was challenging but very rewarding. It helped me think and ruminate at ease. It also made me face my fears. The itinerary was very intellectually stimulating. With no hurry to return home or to a job, I spent a lot of time in each place and so could gather much through having the time to absorb things slowly.

Has the Fellowship caused you to reconsider how you relate and approach your creative process?

Yes, certainly, it has strengthened my resolve to work at my own pace and participate in life rather than merely produce.

First, we got rid of the studio and put the living space in the city center, with activity right outside the door. It's very important to make one feel part of the city and to encourage people to go out and investigate. The added expense of an apartment in the city center is more than offset by not having to support an additional studio.

People cannot have previously been to the location they are sent to for their Fellowship. We want the risk and excitement associated with a new experience in a new place. The first visit to a new place is unique in its unknown aspect. We can present a diversity and focus that they wouldn't have if they felt the place was familiar. It would be the wrong end of the funnel. If someone has been to the location and has friends and appointments, they go right to the comfortable and familiar. It's human nature.

Learning to navigate a new city in a different country is empowering. Being by yourself and making decisions based on new information every day is empowering. Many of our Fellows find a new sense of confidence and independence after participating in our program. In fact, it is a program about increasing self-confidence, reassessing priorities, and actualizing the self. New ideas and experiences that can be incorporated into one's life and work in a new way. Learning new things while learning about yourself. Doing things you've avoided or neglected because time and career redirected you. For one month their concerns shift, and it makes a difference.

To avoid the (sometimes innocent) nepotism that affects many selection processes and keeps opportunities within a small group in many countries, we changed from the typical outreach. For example, we might contact an adjunct professor at a university. Not the dean or department head, but someone who interacts with people every day and does not usually have the opportunity to give something so valuable away. Explaining the unusual program to them,

not always an easy task, we invite them to recommend the one person they know well who they feel would benefit from such an experience. They put a lot of thought into the selection of their recommendee who must be over 30 years old and never have been to the location we're sending them to. The Fellowship is a complete diversion from one's traditional work. An opportunity to have distance, to reassess.

Recommenders are only invited to nominate once in an effort to avoid the power politics of giving out opportunities. In almost every case the nominated individuals have been amazing people who bring the experience home to others and would otherwise never have received such an opportunity. The Fellow signs an agreement that indicates they understand the program is not promotional but experiential and experimental, that it will not conform to an expected residency structure with a studio and ersatz promotion and that they will not make any artwork. It is a difficult and perception-changing month.

Stephanie Powell - New York City to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 2012

Did you find the restriction on producing work during the Fellowship useful or constraining?

Both: Useful in that the pressure of producing something was not a factor; constraining in that if my usual life is around 3-4 days in my studio so it was a challenge to break the routine of my studio practice. What happened, though, is that I ended up writing more about my work than I ever have, and the tension of the restriction allowed for new ideas to be developed.

We vertically integrate Fellows into a culture by doing what locals do rather than what a traveling artist/tourist would do.

The Fellows end up seeing and doing many things locals don't even know about. In one month they will have attended:

- 8 workshops
 - cooking, writing, improvisation class
- 4 meetings
 - with people in science, architecture, agriculture, financial, social welfare
- 4 volunteer sessions
 - help people in a direct way, disaster relief, learning to read, urban reclamation
- 4 religious/spiritual activities
 - Quaker meetings, singing in Baptist gospel church choir, LDS
- 8 physical activities
 - canoeing, yoga, boxing, hiking, biking, walking, tai chi
- 8 walking, train, and travel tours
 - neighborhood walking tours, factory tours, construction/gentrification site tours
- 2 days travel to a different location
 - Washington, D.C., or Lalibela, Ethiopia, for example
- 8 points of cultural interest
 - architecture, historical sites, landmark
- 8 performances
 - musical recitals, parades, dance, music, theater
- 8 lectures/classes
 - investing, social activism, environmental issues
- 4 films
 - experimental, historical, socially relevant, entertaining
- 4 psychotherapy sessions
- 3-4 free days (rest or elective activities)

It's a level of activity that people generally can't maintain for more than a month.

We provide airfare, an apartment in the city center, a daily schedule of around 75 scheduled meetings, activities, and workshops over the term, very few of which involve “art.” apexart is always concerned with and following the activities of the Fellow and their itinerary while largely leaving them on their own to think and do.

Outgoing locations have included the Australian outback, Ethiopia, Israel, Thailand, Korea, Cambodia, Venezuela, Brazil, Macedonia, Uruguay, among others. Frequently past NYC Fellows have assisted us in their home locations by administering an equally rigorous program there. All programming is directed and overseen by our Program Director here in NYC to maintain the structural intent, while activities are suggested and administered by them. Using their experience from having participated in the program allows alumni to help us determine content but also allows them to see the effect “second hand.”

Fellows don't get to choose their Fellowship location, and aren't sent to locations they've been to previously. Mates and significant others are not invited because being on your own is important and allows spontaneity. Ultimately the program is more about the process than any individual activities and every location offers so much. For our International Fellowships, we generally exclude art locations like Berlin, London, or Shanghai to eliminate art market locations and we attempt to keep Fellows from art in New York City until the final week, at which point many are unsettled by the market atmosphere, a lack of convincing work, and the number of galleries.

Darwin Molina - Mérida, Venezuela, to New York City, 2013
Did you find that you were more likely to attend activities, lectures, and/or events outside of your comfort zone when you returned?
I think that getting involved in activities that are unusual to me helped me to strengthen some aspects of my personality and also turned out interesting as a font of general knowledge. That is why, although at first the activities could be uncomfortable, I ended up valuing it and improving my predisposition to do, see, read, attend, participate, and experience different things that may be out of my comfort zone. So I try to keep doing it, maybe I still do not seek such activities intentionally but when an occasion arises, I remember the words of Steven: "Keep the spirit of the residence."

Do you think the experiential nature of the residency has affected the way you travel and approach new situations?
Yes, mainly I think I have less fear than before, so, that can help to approach with more confidence to different situations.

One of the first things a Fellow might do in a NYC Fellowship is a trip around Manhattan Island on a Circle Line Cruise. A touristic activity, the tour guide on board does a great job providing information on specific history and geography of NYC. Similar activities accomplish similar familiarity in unfamiliar areas. Financial information is often not comfortable for artists, so we arrange for them to meet experts in various sectors, such as real estate and finance, to learn about some areas that traditionally scare them, often finding its not scary or irrelevant. Learning enough about anything makes it interesting. They go to a seminar about investing so if they do start to sell work or get an inheritance they may know more about what to do or at least who or what to ask.

Incorporating therapy for Fellows in the program began in 2012, after a discussion with a colleague who is a therapist, to see what interest there was and what effect it might have.

Fellows participate in “talk therapy,” which is based on the core idea that talking about the things that are bothering people can help clarify them and put them in perspective. They see a psychotherapist four times during their Fellowship to talk about the program or to address other issues that are important to them. They are encouraged to use the time as they wish to address any issue, and many have taken the opportunity to address real and serious situations in a non-threatening professional environment, while others talk about general issues, program activities, and being in a new culture.

Many cultures discourage the therapy process and see the process as evidence of weakness, necessary only as a result of severe trauma. Other cultures discourage speaking about personal issues as being too self-involved. Being in a creative discipline can be especially confusing culturally as “new” values conflict with traditional ones. Sometimes it is an important opportunity for creative people to realize they are not crazy, just because they don’t “fit in.” Speaking with someone who is trained can be invaluable in finding out that you are more normal than you realized and the questions you have are valid and should be addressed. The sessions are private and non-disclosed and have expanded to all of our outbound locations in some capacity. The situation is even more interesting when noting that the therapists often work cross-culturally, dealing with different social values. We hear the experiences are as valuable for the therapists as for our Fellows.

Sarah Hollars - New York City to Bangkok, Thailand, 2016
What event did you find most challenging? Why? And what did it feel like once you overcame your fears about it?

I found the therapy sessions my biggest hurdle. I had never been to therapy and come from a culture (Oregon) that does

not hug let alone tell a stranger what is going on in one's head. It was terrifying to me to go to the first session and I went through a million excuses I could tell apexart about why I couldn't make the appointment but it was also the most challenging and where I learned the most about myself.

Has the Fellowship caused you to reconsider how you relate and approach your creative process?

Yes, I feel that is now okay to connect my process to life rather than the "Art World." Before the Fellowship I tried to keep up on all of the news, all of the art magazines, all of the shows. I was miserable and having a hard time making it to my studio and making any work. Now that I am back I have stopped trying to keep up with everything, instead I am living and my creative process is so much more productive because of it. I feel the way I felt about art before I came to New York, I feel connected to the world again.

It turns out that imposing structure on adult creative people is very successful when properly explained. Especially when most activities end up being much more fun and interesting than anticipated. We attempt to avoid or undermine the comfort zone of "making work" or of being the "artist."

Fellows participate in several volunteer opportunities where a real connection is often made with people from different economies or cultures. It's important for creative people to connect with their audience and artists often feel that is not happening. We attempt to provide a surrogate connection response that can maybe serve as a bridge or even a form of behavioral change and provide alternative ways of communicating to people. Maybe just playing chess in the park with a homeless person or working on a rooftop farm with new people can help redefine this. You learn about yourself. And in a new place, with people you don't know, you can take greater risks.

Fellows spend a lot of time alone and our program encourages it. The number of collectives and groups that submit to our open call programs has risen dramatically. People don't like to work alone much less be alone or out of communication. Someone recently told me that he arrived at his hotel, his phone dead and without a charger, and he was faced with the terrifying prospect of having to spend 45 minutes with himself. Being part of a group may make you feel good and avoid discomfort but it may not encourage the same depth of creativity or inquiry. Time alone is important.

Another Fellow, scheduled for a boxing class, resisted. Relating the thought process to us after the fact, he said he wasn't angry, didn't want to hit anyone, and didn't want to go. But, contractually stipulated, he went and found out that boxing was a sport, it was fun and was actually a form of self-expression. How do they integrate their experiences into their life and/or work? Good question. It's on our questionnaire.

Meeting with people you don't know without a specific reason or protracted script is difficult and challenging, but also really exhilarating; and you come away stronger. We intentionally do not schedule or allow artist talks or studio visits that compromise the potential of real discussion and interaction with people Fellows meet. They can always begin speaking about one of the activities they did or will do or, as we suggest, ask the other person what they do. New activities and meetings with people outside of your interests and socioeconomic group are important. We don't know what appointment will have the greatest effect and hedge our bets with volume.

Ashley Walters – Capetown, South Africa, to New York City, 2016
Did you find your Fellowship engaging overall? Intellectually challenging?

Yes, on so many levels. I was constantly kept on my toes, not knowing what to expect on each new day. I then later started to embrace the feeling of the unknown more and more. Intellectually it was very challenging as there were many occasions where I felt completely overwhelmed, but as a result I tried to engage even further in response, wanting to better understand each new situation/subject or conversation.

Has the Fellowship caused you to reconsider how you relate to and approach your creative process?

Before attending the Fellowship, I was not very keen with the idea of exploring the unknown, listening and incorporating others' feedback to the extent that I'm currently experiencing now. I often used the notion of collaboration when I spoke about my creative process, and thinking about it now I feel it was just a front for trying to make the next sale or whatever other reason. I was making art for art sake, or at least the way I was taught in art school. After my Fellowship experience my thinking and approach to making art is constantly shifting, taking inspiration from many facets of life. I have no idea how this will affect the outcome and that's okay.

With up to four events per day, Fellows might go to an improvisation class, an aerial yoga class, a roller derby, sing in a Baptist church, go kayaking, or learn how to cook Thai food. The places, people, and events that we select are intended to provide an in-depth cultural journey into the different sides of the host city, its environs, and population, as well as self-confrontation. The schedule aims to look beyond and around the art world, and tries to showcase aspects of the location that otherwise might be overlooked but that nevertheless hold a well of inspiration. It is a geographical, historical, and intellectual exploration that combines the high and the low, art and non-art, the mundane with the extraordinary.

Reid Nicholls - New York City to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 2014
It has had a great effect on my work and my approach to my work. The people that I met when exploring some of Cambodia's social justice issues and the artists who were making work related to those issues really inspired me. It's amazing to me that I had to go all the way to Cambodia just to have someone remind me that it's alright to follow your conscience, and to even explain my work in that context. But I did. I came back to the United States with the desire to be fearless in my work, the way Kavy Samnang is with his. Do whatever is necessary to complete the work and let your conscience be your guide. Immediately I can say I stopped second-guessing myself and started to trust my choices, in topic and execution, leaning more on intuition and improvisation. Not completely, but as my projects progress.

Learning to navigate New York City, Addis Ababa, Montevideo, Phnom Penh, or Seoul is empowering. Being by yourself is empowering. Making decisions based on new information every day is personally empowering. Our Fellows universally express a new sense of confidence and independence after participating.

I've seen truly amazing residency locations around the world set up for people to go and work at, with great accommodations and the freedom to do work. We are traveling more but experiencing less, staying within the familiar. If artists do the same work in the residency as they were doing before they arrived and the same work when they return home, what is the benefit? Is networking and spending your time in an unfamiliar studio to make an often compromised show in an effort to secure another residency or an exhibition the best use of the time energy and money involved? Others organizations do this and think so. We respectfully don't.

Our program is intense, uncomfortable, assaultive, and challenging. We describe the program as being similar in some ways to moving to a new city, in that month or two period before you know people or get involved. It's not like visiting or being a tourist, because the Fellow has his own apartment and he's on his own. The stress to produce is not there. You're not yet involved in activities so you have the time to walk and you look. You go into a shop because it's interesting and not because it's new or trendy. It's a return to a kind of adolescent freedom. All possible because you've agreed to not make art, resist self-promoting, and to attend everything in the schedule. Some 75 activities in a 30-day period.

Programs that only provide a studio/living space are doing a disservice to their own efforts and support. The potential is so much greater. When you leave school there are few critical opportunities for you to re-evaluate what you're doing. And it's hard to change a direction you're committed to. You're concerned about everything from other's expectations to a fear of losing your identity by changing your work. While professionals in other fields attend classes and seminars to keep learning, this is generally not something that happens in our creative world. In a group we travel to exotic locations and cultures and see the same people and artwork while we move between the gallery, hotel, restaurant, and museum, infrequently exploring the sub-surface local except in organized groups going to prescribed locations.

Lior Pinsky – Jerusalem, Israel, to New York City, 2013

Do you think the Fellowship will have an effect on your work?

The truth is I came back overwhelmed, and I haven't really managed to do anything coherent since. The Fellowship made me think about things I do and why I do them. There was this guy I met just when I got back, he's into documentary films and news writing. A true working class defender. We connected and met a couple of times. The most interesting talks. Now we are talking about doing something together. The medium wasn't discussed yet. But NY certainly made me want to experience new fields of making. For the past few years I have also struggled with my self-trying to make art with a social effect. Not an easy thing. And I think the month of the Fellowship took me away from my familiar artistic making in a way I can really choose my next step now.

As artists we're often observers rather than participators. Hiding behind a camera or an artist persona, we become the commentator eager to record or comment but not to join in. When was the last time you put yourself in an uncomfortable situation electively? Doing something you don't know how to do and feeling comfortable or brave enough to do it in front of others is incredibly liberating. We care too much about what others think.

The meetings we schedule for Fellows with interesting people in the community involves sending them both to an activity neither has done. It might be a lecture or physical activity but it takes the other person out of their comfort area and gives them both something to talk about. We don't want "studio visits" or the "I have a show here" - "I have a show there" pong game where no one listens to an exchange that is quickly forgotten. If you go canoeing with a local architect who is as nervous as you are, you probably talk about more personal things.

A NYC arts admin who accompanied one of our Fellows, 2016
It was really nice to meet her and we had an amazing time in court. In fact, I went back the next day to see how the case was proceeding with my colleague who is from Uzbekistan. It was super interesting, and the judge (according to my on-line research) is considered one of the best in the State. It was pretty impressive.

We bring or send people to situations and places of great opportunity and then keep them from “capitalizing” on it by not arranging networking opportunities. Something people have criticized. We genuinely want people to succeed and believe if they get new and different experiences and challenges they will have a better chance at long-term challenge and success than if we arranged social meetings for them. The diversity of activities and references make our Fellows more interesting to people they meet, which often means more opportunity. When people tell us that we have to think about how artists can make money, we understand the problem, but this is not our mission.

Are we really affecting people the way we think we are? Or to the degree we say? This is the purpose of our sending periodic questionnaires to Fellows after their Fellowship; we ask them what worked, what didn't, and what their take away is. Some of the excerpts included above show this as well as the sections of Fellows' online journals, which are available in full on our site www.apexart.org, along with their exit interviews.

Susana Pilar Delahante Matienzo - Havana, Cuba, to New York City, 2016

My last day of the Fellowship in New York has arrived. How do I feel? Desolated and sad, trying to understand to where the days went. You are thinking: What Susana? Yes, I know, I had written

about many of them but still, inside me, I would like to have more of those days, I will deeply miss getting up for an unknown challenge in the city of New York and going to bed with a new thing in my heart. I will miss everything apexart gifted me: the ridiculous loudness of the police cars in the street, the unknown Church's clock melody, the security guards, the performers in the subway, chess players in the park, merchants in Chinatown, the ladies from my nearby grocery store who started to know me, the sound of the heating, the light of the other houses, and countless other things.

What have we learned?

1. Be honest with yourself as often as possible.
2. Listen to others except when you shouldn't, which is often.
3. Change your mind often. It's like exercise.
4. Don't care about what others think, they're too busy thinking about themselves.
5. Talk to others about their idea of success and yours.
It's confusing.
6. Good luck. See line 1.

Steven Rand (steven.rand@apexart.org) is an artist living in NYC. Says he tries to make the art world a more equitable, challenging, and interesting place through direct action and intervention.