Miriam La Rosa

New Start: the Marrgu Residency Program and the Future of Showing

Abstract

This paper addresses the ontology of residencies, interrogating artist residencies in relation to the ostensive, that involves the act of showing, displaying, exhibiting and demonstrating something. By focusing on a digital project curated by the author for the Marrgu Residency Program—an Indigenous-led initiative developed by the Durrmu Arts Centre in Peppimenarti (Northern Territory, Australia)—La Rosa employs a practice-led rather than purely theoretical methodology. In parallel, and through a discussion on the current developments of the Marrgu digital residency, the paper addresses the future of showing for regionally based artists of non-Western heritage, in a globalised digital world. It ultimately advocates for an innovative understanding of ostension framed as a hosting practice: an act of connection rather than display.

Keywords

Artist Residency, Ostension, Hosting, Gift Exchange, Digital Residency, Marrgu Residency Program, Durrmu Arts Aboriginal Corporation.

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New Start: the Marrgu Residency Program and the Future of Showing

Miriam La Rosa

Regina Pilawuk Wilson attending a Zoom meeting at the Art Centre, while making a syaw (fishnet) work. Durrmu Arts Centre, Peppimenarti (NT), Australia. October 2020. Image Courtesy: Durrmu Arts.

L'ostensione rappresenta il primo livello di significazione attiva, *ed è l'artificio usato per primo da due persone che non conoscono la stessa lingua.*[1]

1. Introduction

Like many initiatives in 2020, artist residency programs were profoundly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic—no doubt because the inability to travel seemingly affects the ontology of residencies. Prior to 2020, the act of being 'in residence' demanded the often-necessary step of physical travel: an activity with a meaning and

1 For the English translation see page 70 and footnote 46. (Emphasis in original). Umberto Eco, *Trattato Di Semiotica Generale* (Milano: Bompiani, 1975), 294.

value of its own in relation to a residency, and a crucial element for its definition. Whether one decides to follow the conventional narrative on residencies—which places their origins in the 17th century and within the geopolitical contours of the European world—or seeks alternative routes to understand them, their history is intrinsically related to that of migration and mobility.[2] What can be left of a residency when travelling is no longer an option?

The urgency of this question has been addressed in recent international forums by residency-specialist organisations such as Res Artis and Arquetopia Foundation.[3] Driving these discussions was mainly a desire to find solutions rather than examine the nature or ontology of residencies. The proposed answer has, predictably, been the virtual residency. Although communication technologies and more recently digital technologies proliferated well before the Coronavirus crisis took place, their possibility in residencies and the wider arts industry had remained relatively unexplored, largely confined to rethinking the archive and some experimental art practices.

In this paper I will address the ontology of residencies, interrogating artist residencies in relation to the ostensive—that which involves the act of showing, displaying, exhibiting and demonstrating something. By focusing on a digital project I am curating for the Marrgu Residency Program—an Indigenous-led initiative developed by the Durrmu Arts Centre in Peppimenarti (Northern Territory, Australia)—I am also employing a practice-led rather than purely theoretical methodology.[4] In parallel, and through a discussion on the current developments of the Marrgu digital residency, the paper will address the future of showing for regionally-based artists of non-Western heritage, in a globalised digital world. It will ultimately advocate for an innovative understanding of ostension framed as a hosting practice: an act of connection rather than display.

Long before the Marrgu Residency Program, my personal and professional journey with artist residencies had begun in 2015, with a six-month program I co-curated at the Window Space Gallery in London.[5] Travelling per se was not at stake then, since the artist involved, Charlotte Warne Thomas, was London-based. However, a requirement was for her to relocate her studio inside the Window Gallery—a vitrine—hence tackling the idea of residing as quite literally

2
A concise history of residencies has been circulated through residencies web directories such as Res Artis and Transartists. A 2019 anthology, edited by Taru Elfving, Irmeli Kokko and Pascal Gielen is the first attempt to expand upon this Western-centric narrative by giving a voice to different programs, art practitioners and academics from different regions as well. However, the latest annual conference organised by Res Artis (February 5 – 8, 2019, Kyoto, Japan) showed that a comparative methodology, in which eastern and southern programs are presented against the traditional northern, more established examples, is still in place to discuss artist residencies. Taru Elfving, Irmeli Kokko, Pascal Gielen (eds.), *Contemporary Artist Residencies. Reclaiming Time and Space* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2019). For a concise account of the history of residencies see also: Miriam La Rosa, "Introduction", in *In Transition: The Artistic and Curatorial Residency*, eds. Margarida B. Amorim, Alejandro Ball, Miriam La Rosa and Stefania Sorrentino (London: CtC Press Ltd, 2015). In his Doctoral research project at the Edinburgh College of Art, Pau Cata Marles has written—what he names—an alternative proto-history with a focus on the Arabic region. Pau Cata, "Moving Knowledges: Towards a Speculative Arab Art Residency Proto-History" (Edinburgh College of Art, Scotland, 2021), https://aneventwithoutitspoem.com/, accessed 11 April 2021.

3
Between September and October 2020, Res Artis: Worldwide Network of Arts Residencies and IASPIS, the Swedish Arts Grants Committee's International Programme for Visual and Applied Artists, with the support of Creative Victoria, presented a free series of five webinars titled *Residencies in Challenging Times*. Available at: https://resartis.org/2020/08/27/residencies-in-challenging-times/, accessed January 2021. From June 3 to July 27, 2020, Arquetopia Foundation run *The End of the Grand Tour? Virtual Symposium on Artist Residencies: Future, Place and State*. Available at: https://www.arquetopia.org, accessed January 2021.

4
The Marrgu Residency Program: https://www.durrmuarts.com/marrgu, accessed January 2021.

5
The program was entitled *LIMITACTION* and comprised a series of monthly events addressing the space's limitations through four installations: accessibility, privacy, freedom and space. The events were followed by a roundtable discussion at the Whitechapel Gallery (June 2015) and the launch of a publication on the topic of artistic and curatorial residencies. See *In Transition: The Artistic and Curatorial Residency*.

inhabiting a space. The results of this project, a series of exhibitions and a publication, later led me to formalise my curiosity for the subject within the framework of a doctoral research project.[6] The first digital residencies I encountered, and briefly discussed elsewhere, functioned as platforms for a virtual showcase of art.[7] These examples targeted artworks realised through digital processes and technologies but also raised questions about the engagement between resident artists, audiences and hosting contexts (how can the virtual host?), as well as notions of conviviality and reciprocity, which are other key features in the characterisation of the residency phenomenon.

2. Marrgu

Running since 2018, Marrgu provides creative practitioners with an opportunity to engage with Ngan'gikurrunggurr artists and community members on Country. This program was established by Durrmu Arts to encourage intercultural exchange, knowledge sharing and relationship building between remote and urban communities, local and international artists, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural practices. The word *Marrgu* means "knowledge sharing" as well as "new start" in Peppimenarti's Ngan'gi language.[8] With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, Marrgu has adapted to a virtual format that uses technology to connect participants.

I began working with Durrmu Arts in 2019, on the occasion of a cross-cultural exchange I co-curated with Kade McDonald (then Executive Director of Durrmu Arts and current CEO of Agency[9]) through residencies and a public program of exhibitions and events, between Sicily and two Aboriginal territories in Australia, Gippsland and Peppimenarti. Marrgu was one of the hosts of the project that involved Sicilian artist Giuseppe Lana, Gunai and Monero Nations artist Steaphan Paton and Ngan'gikurrunggurr woman, senior artist and Cultural Director of Durrmu Arts, Regina Pilawuk Wilson. Following the positive response to this endeavour, I was asked to be involved once again in the development of another project, this time occurring online. The current residency takes the form of an artistic exchange between Wilson, Yindjibarndi artist Katie West and Malaysia-born, Aotearoa-raised and Australia-based artist Fayen d'Evie.

The associations between their practices are not obvious, although West and d'Evie have an ongoing artistic collaboration.[10] Wilson's art, based around painting and weaving, is a contemporary expression of her ancestral cultural practices, whereas West and d'Evie experiment with different mediums to realise large-scale, textile installations (West) and works that investigate touch, movement, language and sound (d'Evie). What connects them in this context is an interest in tactility and history and the use of materials that derive from their surroundings—be they stories, objects or, for Wilson and West in particular, natural

6
My PhD is based on a curatorial project—a cross-cultural exchange residency between Sicily, Gippsland and Peppimenarti—I developed in 2019 to investigate notions of gift exchange and host-guest relationships in the context of the artist residency, with the South as a geopolitical focus (The University of Melbourne, School of Culture and Communication, Art History department, 2018-2021).

7
These examples include: x-temporary and the Digital Artist Residency (DAR). Miriam La Rosa, "Moving Outside Fixed Boundaries: … 'in Residence'?", *Digimag Journal* (2017): 35-45.

8
Regina Pilawuk Wilson, 2020. https://www.durrmuarts.com/marrgu, accessed January 2021

9
Agency is an organisation that "celebrates and promotes Indigenous art, culture and people on a local, national and international scale through the initiation and facilitation of ethical and sound investments into Indigenous-led projects and partnerships", https://agencyprojects.org/home, accessed January 2021.

10
D'Evie and West are currently collaborating on the project Museum Incognita, which "revisits neglected, concealed, or obscured histories, activates embodied readings, and archives ephemeral artworks and practices", https://www.museumincognita.space, accessed January 2021.

fibres and colours. In other words, their work shares a committed engagement with the places that host them. Their regional location and transcultural formations, Western and non-Western cultural inheritances, are other significant points of relation. In fact, although they do not necessarily address identity politics in their work, these artists' relationship with and interpretation of locality and Country play a role in positioning their contribution within this exchange. Lastly, but no less relevant, is the will and desire to spend time together. On several occasions, when asked about the aspect of the residency they most appreciate, they have all referred to the opportunity to stop and slow down—to sit in front of their screens and meet, away from the multiple commitments of daily life.[11]

Most initiatives born in the current pandemic are entirely online-focused. A remarkable example is the mentorship program Artists for Artists (AfA) conceived by a collective of artists, curators and academics as online masterclasses built upon the guiding principles of "peer-to-peer exchange and radical care".[12] The Marrgu digital residency follows the same principles of mutuality and interchange in a virtual setup, but it equally emphasises the physical space inhabited by the three artists—who are based in different Indigenous Countries and States of Australia: Wilson in Ngan'gikurrunggurr Country, Northern Territory; West in Noongar Ballardong Boodja, Western Australia; and d'Evie in Dja Dja Wurrung Country, Victoria. As part of the project, they were asked to share images of their daily art practice, videos and field/voice recordings of their walks in a virtual diary, whilst also sending materials from their *bush studios*, postcards and small gifts to one another through the postal service. Walks and postal deliveries have become striking elements of lockdown and life in isolation, even after restrictions were partially lifted. The residency experiments from out of these facts. It takes inspiration from Mail Art, a precursor of internet art, or net.art, to address alternative forms of connection in the time of coronavirus, challenging the current expansion and shrinking of time and space.

Mail Art is a relevant practice for this project since it embodies the twofold purpose of communication, through travel, and connection, through art. Art historians have outlined its chronology in distinct periods.[13] Deemed to originate in works by Marcel Duchamp, Kurt Schwitters and the Italian Futurists, Mail Art gained momentum in the 1960s when artists like Ray Johnson and Edward M. Plunkett began to employ the mail service as an official form of artistic correspondence. However, in a text published in *Art Journal* in 1977, Plunkett notes that the art of correspondence goes back to primordial times, crediting queen Cleopatra as the first one to inaugurate it when she wrapped herself into a rug to be sent as a surprise to Julius Caesar.[14] Following his line of thought, further prehistoric instances of this will to travel, trade and exchange can be dated back to the Palaeolithic age, with the over two hundred Venus figurines retrieved throughout Europe and Asia. The materials and visual characteristics of the little statues suggest that they might have been objects of trade or, at least, subject to travelling.[15] To return to an

11
This statement comes from an interview I conducted with the three artists in December 2020 at Bus Projects, Melbourne, during a podcast recording session on the current developments of the Marrgu digital residency.

12
Artists for Artists: https://www.afamasterclass.org/about, accessed January 2021.

13
Laura Dunkin-Hubby, "A Brief History of Mail Art's Engagement with Craft (C. 1950-2014)", *Journal of Modern Craft* 9, no. 1 (2016): 35-54.

14
See the link: https://artpool.hu/Ray/Publications/Plunkett.html, accessed January 2021.

15
Olga Soffer, James M. Adovasio and David C. Hyland, "The 'Venus' Figurines : Textiles, Basketry, Gender, and Status in the Upper Paleolithic", *Current Anthropology* 41, no. 4 (2000). See also: John Noble Wilford, "'Venus' Figurines from Ice Age Rediscovered in an Antique Shop", *The New York Times,* February 1, 1994. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/1994/02/01/science/venus-figurines-from-ice-age-rediscovered-in-an-antique-shop.html, accessed January 2021. There have been several studies on the purpose and function of the Venus figurines. In 2020, a discovery concluded that they might have helped pre-historic Europeans to survive the Ice age. Garry Shaw, "Voluptuous Venus Figurines May Have Helped Prehistoric Europeans Survive the Ice Age", *The Art Newspaper* (December 3, 2020). Available at: https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/voluptuous-venus-figurines-may-have-helped-prehistoric-europeans-survive-the-ice-age, accessed January 2021.

Australian context, there are accounts of pre-colonial Aboriginal art being taken on tours. As Aboriginal artists responded to the colonial demand for their art, anthropologists and later tourists functioned as couriers to distant markets.[16]

Perhaps Plunkett's awareness of the deep time genealogy of travelling art gave him the confidence to challenge normative, museum-specific, contemporary art practices by creating *The New York Correspondence School* (also referred to as Correspondance), which was active until 1975.[17] In the 1960s, George Maciunas and the Fluxus artists also used the post to send ideas, thoughts and artistic prompts to each other, creating an international network at a time when the internet was not an option. The trend was then revisited in the 1990s. British curator Matthew Higgs established Imprint, a project in which emerging artists including Jeremy Deller, Martin Creed, Peter Doig, Chris Ofili and Fiona Banner mailed provocative works to critics, curators and other individuals associated with the artworld.[18] Art historian and artist Laura Dunkin-Hubby has furthermore identified what she names a latest *era* (ca. 2000-2014), where Mail Art is still operating, and coexisting with the internet age.[19]

In the altered (art)world's structure that the pandemic has created, some artists have again begun using the postal service as a means for their work to move in a portable format.[20] However, the practice of art travelling in place of people, and through shipping, had already been adopted pre-pandemic by artists struggling with socio-political restrictions imposed by authoritarian governments. A significant example is the work *Airmail Paintings* by Eugenio Dittborn, developed in the 1970s during the dictatorship in Chile as a series of paintings that could be folded and sent abroad.[21] The scope of the project was to reach out to the outside world, in the manner of a message in a bottle. Similarly, a few decades later, the South Korean artist Kyungah Ham began smuggling designs into North Korea, through helpers based in Russia and China, to be translated on to embroidery made of silk by a group of anonymous artisans. The finished works, which were large scale representations of chandeliers, were then trafficked back out of North Korea and displayed at galleries worldwide.[22] These stories reinforce the point, core to this project and discussion, that (travelling) art holds an incredible connective power among individuals and cultures. Beyond the desire and need for communication, this connective power especially manifests when people experience conditions of remoteness and isolation or when they live under enforced measures that restrict their freedom of movement and expression—or simply want to challenge normative site-specific practices of established art centres.

16
Ian McLean, *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016).

17
William S. Wilson, "NY Correspondance School", *Art and Artists* I, no. 1 (1966). Available at: https://www.warholstars.org/ray-johnson.html, accessed January 2021.

18
In 2016, The Whitechapel Gallery, London, has proposed an archival exhibition on the history of this endeavour, entitled *Imprint 93* (March 19—September 25, 2016). See the link: https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/imprint-93/, accessed January 2021.

19
Dunkin-Hubby, "A Brief History of Mail Art's Engagement with Craft (C. 1950-2014)".

20
Nanette Orly, "How Artists Turned to the Postal Service", *Art Guide Australia* 2020. Available at: https://artguide.com.au/how-artists-turned-to-the-postal-service, accessed January 2021.

21
Sociologist and critic Nelly Richard has written extensively in this regard. See Nelly Richard, *The Insubordination of Signs: Political Change, Cultural Transformation, and Poetics of the Crisis* (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2004).

22
David Segal, "An Artist Unites North and South Korea, Stitch by Stitch", *The New York Times*, July 26, 2018. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/26/arts/design/kyungah-ham-north-korea.html?login=email&auth=login-email, accessed January 2021.

In our residency, an interest in the possibilities of Mail Art was raised in relation to *Museum as Bureau of Communication* (2020), a project devised by artist Olaf Nicolai for MACRO, Rome, where the museum functions as a mediator between two people who wish to share a message through postcards. D'Evie brought it to my attention, prompting me to incorporate post deliveries in the structure of the residency. Thus far, the materials exchanged in the context of the Marrgu residency have comprised two postcards painted by Wilson for West and d'Evie, alongside strings of *merrepen* (sand palm) and berries harvested in Peppimenarti. D'Evie has responded with a series of embossed papers—cutouts from one of her publishing projects that Wilson has in turn reacted to, by painting over them.

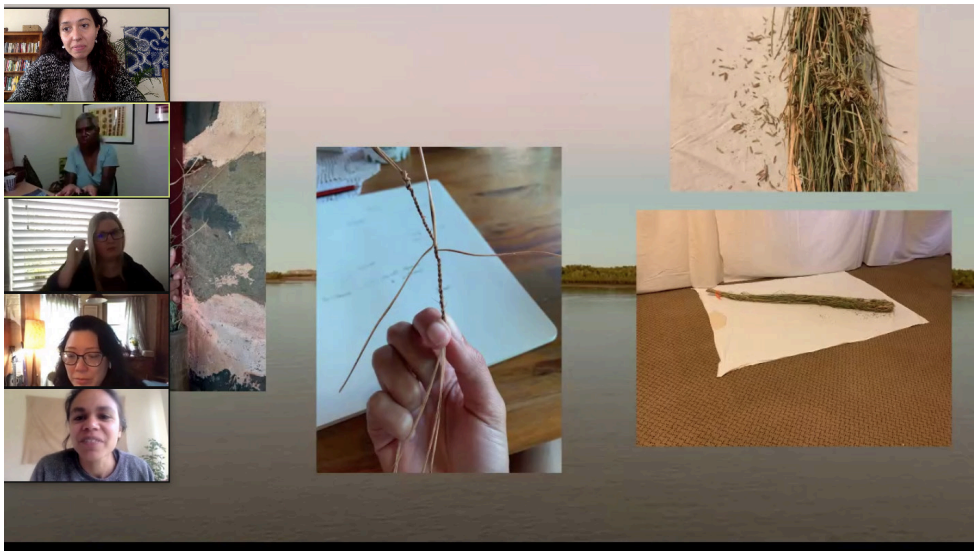
Regina Pilawuk Wilson painting postcards for Fayen d'Evie and Katie West. Durrmu Arts Centre, Peppimenarti (NT), Australia. October 2020. Image Courtesy: Durrmu Arts.

Regina Pilawuk Wilson painting over embossed paper sent via mail by Fayen d'Evie. Marrgu digital residency, Durrmu Arts, Peppimenarti (NT), Australia. December 2020. Image courtesy: Durrmu Arts.

The process of running the residency digitally is not effortless. There is a lot of coordination involved (since each artist resides in a different time zone), tasks that need to be set in advance and patience required from all fronts. Moreover, and contrary to the usual understanding of online connection as fast-paced if not hyper accelerated, this project has embraced slowness. Meetings occur with a loose, rhythmic cadence and often involve the participation of plus ones, be they assistants on site or family members, especially in Peppimenarti, where access to the internet is available only at the Art Centre.

A priority at the commencement of the residency was to hold studio visits to set the grounds for the exchange. In the virtual setup, these talks consisted of presentations with images: PowerPoint, sound and videos delivered via Zoom about updates in the artists' work and the history and stories of their locations. Through this approach, d'Evie and West learnt about Wilson's community and their harvesting, weaving and painting techniques in a series of pre-recorded videos that Wilson produced especially for them, while working with the *merrepen* fibres she mailed them. Connecting through touch—using and manipulating materials selected and offered by the participants for their exchange, while attending their meetings online—holds a special significance at a time when engaging with others and the wider world in tangible ways has been almost completely forbidden.

In response to Wilson's studio sharing, West showed the group digital outcomes of archival research and fieldwork she has been doing in Western Australia. D'Evie then presented digitally recorded performative experiments made during lockdown of herself dancing on Country, alongside field recordings of sounds from the bush and further images of in-progress work. Showing, displaying and 'pinpointing'—what in this paper I call 'ostension'—have therefore become core features of the exchange. One may object that the act of presenting is a common trait of any residency project, but I will prove otherwise and suggest that the shift to online engagement leads to a more complex degree of ostension, which I aim to analyse in depth in the following section of this text.



Studio visit with Katie West: looking at materials and colours. Zoom, October 2020. From top to bottom: Miriam La Rosa (curator), Regina Pilawuk Wilson (artist), Kara Rodski (Durrmu Arts, Project Coordinator), Fayen d'Evie (artist), Katie West (artist). Image Courtesy: Durrmu Arts.

Studio visit with Fayen d'Evie: recording and dancing in the bush. November 2020. From top to bottom: Miriam La Rosa (curator), Regina Pilawuk Wilson (artist), Fayen d'Evie (artist), Katie West (artist). Image Courtesy: Durrmu Arts.

3. The Ostensive in Residence

Today the field of residencies is extremely wide and diversified, with programs proliferating in the most disparate locations—from public and institutional venues to private and experimental settings.[23] Assumptions that tend towards homogenisation are not possible, nor are they useful. Yet we will agree that for many artists, a 'residency' is often understood as a research and/or production phase within their practice, and is not necessarily geared towards the display of art. If the latter occurs, it does so as a consequence and result of the residency experience.[24] The Marrgu online residency began with the same purpose, to focus on research rather than display. However, the participants also found themselves engaged in a compulsory process of demonstration and *exhibition* that is both dictated and mediated by the nature of digital connection and the surface of the screen. Virtual infrastructures such as Zoom, Google and Instagram serve as instruments for artists to realise their exchanges. These tools are inherently based on the ostensive condition of art: the

23 For an account of this diversity, visit Res Artis (https://resartis.org) or TransArtists (https://www.transartists.org), accessed April 2021.

24 Vytautas Michelkevičius, *Mapping Artistic Research - Towards a Diagrammatic Knowing* (Vilnius: Vilnius Academy of Arts Press, 2018).

(live) exhibition of concepts, images and in-progress works, unfolding alongside an equally *curated* presentation of identity and sense of place.

The notion of ostension is employed in communication theory to address the intention to transmit something. It has been widely discussed in the fields of philosophy and linguistics by, amongst others, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Umberto Eco and it has also been applied to folklorist studies by John H. McDowell, for instance.[25] The latter frames ostension as a counterpart to iconicity (representation) and a vehicle to generate what he names "a narrative epiphany", which provides "a virtual encounter with experience".[26] Whereas an icon represents—as it symbolises and stands for—something else, a narrative epiphany *presents*. It offers a virtual encounter with the experience in the sense that it evokes and creates the illusion of ostension, of the experience itself—including audiences as participants in the event rather than spectators of it. From a semiotic perspective, though, one can argue that everything is perceived as a sign. As Jacques Derrida would put it, we are always imagining that moment when a foot leaves its print on the sand but all we are left to look at is the print, the trace, on the sand.[27]

Speaking of ostensive definitions, Wittgenstein refused the idea that the meaning of a word can be conveyed by the action of pointing at, displaying, or showing the thing a word refers to. For the philosopher, a pre-existing knowledge of the meaning of the thing itself is mandatory in order to understand any example that is being provided. It follows that meaning is given by the experience of something. Hence, the understanding of a word's meaning succeeds the experience of the thing the word stands for. In other words, showing cannot connect to reality but it is, at most, an association between written and spoken word.[28] The use we make of language, then, can affect the perception we have of reality.

To exemplify this point, I will borrow from John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, whose driving message is that the act of seeing precedes words—while showing the opposite, that we see with signs. As the art critic highlights, language and narrative have the power to frame reality in exclusive and exclusionary ways. In support of his claims Berger brings forward different case studies: the history and meaning of the nude—the representation and presentation of women in art, which subtends a male-centric view of the world; the tradition of oil painting as the medium to embody and signify possession; and the role of advertising in depicting the ultimate neoliberal desire.[29] In art terms, these considerations suggest a double implication. On the one hand, exhibitions are agents that can either reinforce or challenge a world one is already familiar with. They are like a work of fiction in that they create counter-worlds, which can only be understood when referred to the reality we live in and, therefore, know. On the other hand, they can also be used in demagogic as well as subversive ways. Think of the impact of mega exhibitions such as biennials, triennials and documenta in the definition of contemporary art, and in shaping the collective view of history and power; or think of collection displays—almost all museum displays in 20th century Europe and the United States—that have privileged a merely Western perspective on the world. Think then, as a counterpart, of exhibitions that have attempted to re-write history by proposing previously overlooked and suppressed narratives such as the 22nd Biennale of Sydney | *NIRIN* (2020). With its unprecedented representation of Indigenous practitioners from

25
The earliest use of the phrase "ostensive definition" can be found in the 1920s, in the work of logician William Ernest Johnson.

26
John H. McDowell, "Beyond Iconicity: Ostension in Kamsá Mythic Narrative", *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 19, no. 2/3 (1982): 127.

27
Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

28
Ludwig Wittgenstein and G. E. M. Anscombe, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963).

29
John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London and New York: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 2008).

across the globe, it exemplifies the ostensive recognition of otherwise marginalised voices.[30]

How do such considerations inform the theme of residencies? By being based on, and defined by, the experience of sharing *while* being in a place, residencies are platforms that establish meaning and do not function in an ostensive way. They do not present an experience of art but are rather experiences of art in a set space and in real time. To be a resident means to reside, live in and actively engage with a place. When unrestricted travel was possible, the peculiarity of these projects often consisted in elevating the journey as an integral part of the event, one that would ultimately inform the research and practice of the artists involved. A digital residency, however, initiates a necessary relationship with the ostensive for the politics of displaying are deeply entrenched within the structure of virtual connectivity. Showing is an imperative of any online activity, where the participant has to choose and select—in other words, curate—those aspects of the self they intend to emphasise. Returning to Berger, at the time he wrote his book and delivered his art lectures through different TV stations—the BBC and Channel 4—the most powerful form of media was television. Although the latter was labelled as a "cool medium" (with increased involvement and decreased description), there was still no option for spectators to question statements and propositions live.[31]

Now, and in the digital residency, the possibility of open-source curation (or an illusion thereof?) is instead at stake. New media art has been dealing with this potential for a long time. Consider the work of artists such as 0100101110101101.org, Evan Roth or Rafael Rozendaals, to mention but a few (a comprehensive list is too long to be reported here). Or think of the curatorial approach of Domenico Quaranta: open-source processes, i.e. publicly accessible art for anyone to see, modify and distribute, are nothing new to them. However, in the age of enforced isolation, all art and its fruition have (temporarily?) gone online, and all curating potentially becomes open source. In other words, whilst *digital* sharing, presenting and exchange have previously occurred in both the residency and curatorial field, after the pandemic the great majority of these interactions have become exclusively so.[32]

An online encounter with art demands a different level of curatorial action than a physical one, whereby, complying with the digital language, artists present their work in combination with their inclinations, inspirations, political views and personal beliefs. Social media platforms are indeed built upon the principle of curation: a carefully filtered display of self-image, identity and opinion. The distinction between private life and public persona is softened and often nullified. This concept may especially resonate with those of us who, during lockdown, have translated both social and professional commitments to the domain of Zoom meetings. We have experienced physical detachment as much as a form of unprecedented intimacy, with work coming directly into our homes. By means of comparison, digital connectivity demystifies and re-mystifies art: it takes it down from the pedestal and desacralises its meaning. Simultaneously, it challenges the depth of

30
The 22nd Biennale of Sydney | *NIRIN* (March 14—September 6, 2020): https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/archive/22nd-biennale-sydney-nirin/, accessed January 2021.

31
The categories "hot media" and "cool media" were coined by Media scholar Marshall McLuhan to refer to media that, respectively, engage one's senses totally (e.g. radio and film), hence decreasing the level of audience's involvement, and less completely (e.g. television, speech or comic books) requiring a higher deal of involvement to decode content. The internet, of course, is a category of its own, whereby the relationship between provider and audience is way more complex and in simpatico, becoming the "extension of ourselves" that McLuhan himself had alluded to. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* [1st ed.], (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

32
In stating this, it is important to mention that during lockdown, some artworks remained blocked inside studios and galleries with no audiences to visit them, not even online. Sartre would argue that this art is *not there* with no one being able to experience it. He would also say that through the act of seeing and experiencing art, visitors would somewhat take it away, steal it, with their memory. See Carroll Mark, "'It Is': Reflections on the Role of Music in Sartre's *La Nausée*", *Music & Letters* 87, no. 3 (2006). Is this another form of travelling art?

the experience of art. Not all art is suited to, or originally developed for, an online presence.

What is more, and to focus again upon our main topic, digital residencies complicate McDowell's notion of virtual ostension. They create an illusion of experience—in the case of our three resident artists the illusion is that of visiting one another—whilst an experience itself *is* taking place, albeit digitally. Virtual and real-time events mingle. What does this dichotomy mean for the broader understanding of a residency? And how does it manifest in the specific context of the Marrgu digital residency?

The digital gives the ostensive the possibility to occur in multiple registers at the same time, that is with different screens and audio/video channels, which complicate the meaning of the work of art involved in the act of showing. Since the artists cannot be physically present in the same place and at the same time, they provide extracts—examples of their experience—in order to allow their fellow participants to partake in them. Thus, post-2020, travel no longer concerns the mere image of the work of art—which can *travel* through reproduction—but the experience of art itself that, with digital travel, is challenged to redress the impediment of physical movement.[33] This new understanding of the capacity of digital connectivity that we have gained has affected the definition of contemporary art, since it has dramatically changed our relationship with the world we live in. If the expression 'a new normal' has to be interpreted in a far-reaching way, a 'new contemporary art normal' also applies. A statement released in 2010 by artist Oliver Laric reads: "my Web site is not a space of representation but of primary experiences. You are viewing the real thing. And when the work travels to other sites, it is still the real thing".[34] Laric's argument was prescient back then and it is extremely pertinent now. Though, whereas a decade ago it reflected the exclusive condition of art developed with digital technologies and new media processes, today it needs to be thought of in relation to the experience of art as a whole.

If we pause for a moment to look at the etymology of the word (from the Latin verb *ostendo, ostendere, ostendi, ostensus*), we will notice not only that ostension means pointing out, making clear, displaying, exhibiting, revealing or showing, but that it also signifies (from the same root, in the Latin noun *ostium, osti(i)*) concepts such as river mouth, doorway, entrance to the underworld, front door, and starting gate.[35] We can observe an etymological proximity between ostension and hosting, with the host being a gatekeeper—a door opener to the guest in their own home. Hence, through the act of presenting, in the Marrgu digital residency each artist welcomes the other into her own art practice and world. This action is powerful for it leaves great space and autonomy to the presenter-participants to curate their own contribution, directing the narrative of their own story. It also allows them to develop a relationship that is based on, and thrives from, proximity—where the latter is not intended in geographical terms but conceptually—as a long-term rapport of friendship.

The history of hosting is not necessarily a peaceful one. It unfolds through an often-conflicting clash of identities, given by the encounter among *others*. Whilst varying in different societies and cultures, the practice of hospitality has been approached by contemporary critical discourse as a tension and a game of power between hosts and their complements—the guests. In the Marrgu digital residency, these dynamics are disrupted due to the seemingly equalising action of digital connection and the principle of the gift that is exchanged among the participants. I have already mentioned how the artists agreed to send postcards, organic

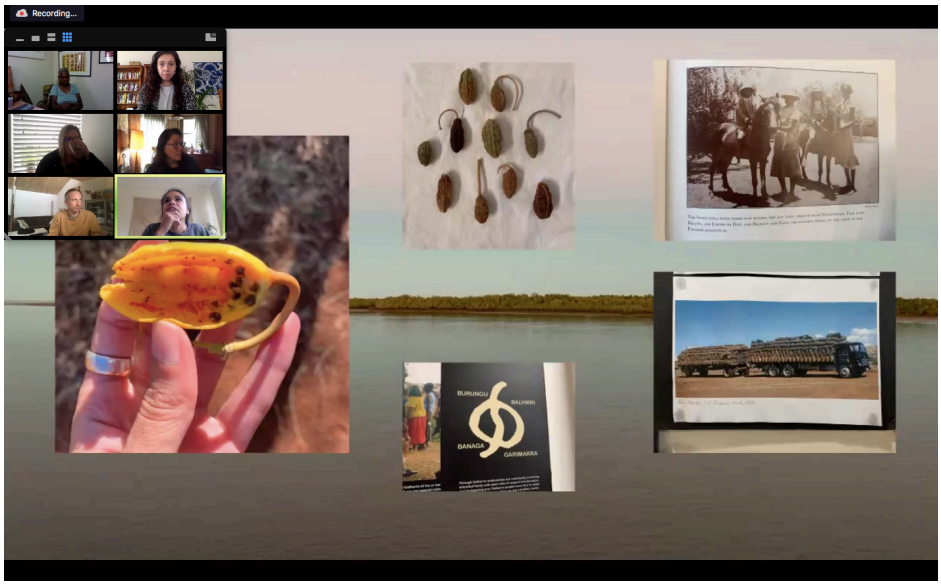
33
On the significance of reproduction in art see: Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* [1935], (London: Penguin, 2008).

34
Domenico Quaranta, "The Real Thing/Interview with Oliver Laric Oliver Laric", *Artpulse* (2010). Available at: http://artpulsemagazine.com/the-real-thing-interview-with-oliver-laric, accessed January 2021.

35
Online Etymology Dictionary: https://www.etymonline.com/word/ostensive, accessed January 2021.

materials and other objects to each other through the postal service. Yet, their gift is also immaterial—it is the time they dedicate to one another and it is the knowledge they offer, offline as well as online. The theory of the gift is used in philosophical and anthropological studies to frame relationships of reciprocities between individuals and groups, described by Marcel Mauss as a form of alternative economy to capitalism.[36] However, as I argue elsewhere, in the hospitality game, the gift is often mistakenly restricted to an exchange occurring between two fixed parties (moving from the host to the guest), and as a bonding relationship that requires a directional comeback (expected from the guest by the host).[37]

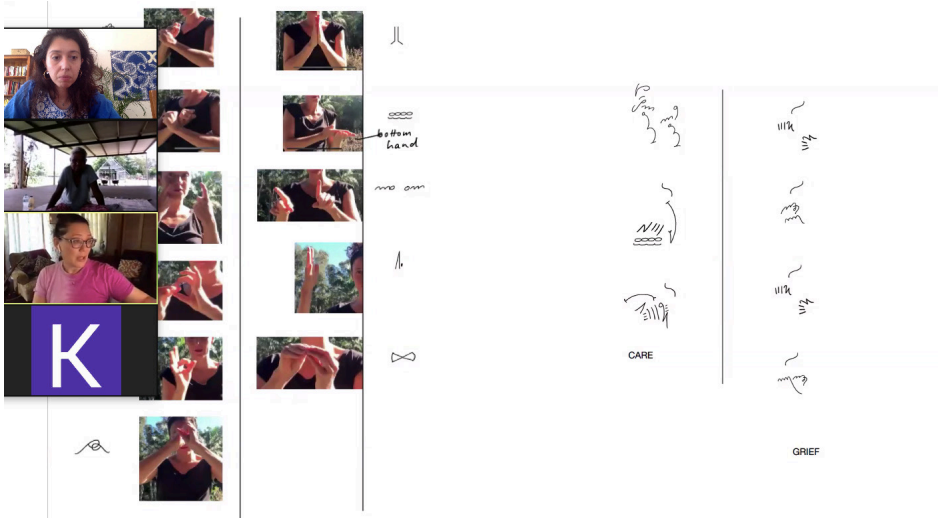
Marrgu's gift instead flows within a dynamic binary—or rather ternary—structure. It moves in and out of a system that draws from the principles of openness, slowness and generosity rather than restriction, fast returns and expectation. The artists involved are three and their exchange is multidirectional, since it affects their individual practices as well as the relationships they are building with one another and within the group. West and d'Evie, for instance, have discovered additional research trajectories in each other's practice that had not emerged before, despite their existing collaboration. Inspired by Wilson's stories and methods, West has begun experimenting with painting. After listening to d'Evie's sound-based work, Wilson has taken advantage of a podcast episode we realised in collaboration with Bus Projects, Melbourne, to coordinate the recording of sounds, music and spoken words from Peppimenarti. We are also considering the possibility of involving a further party, an art institution, as active participant—an enticing prospect in relation to the discourse on the ostensive condition of contemporary art. In fact, what could a museum gift to the artists beyond the promise of exhibiting their work? With the pandemic having created a crisis of ostension, should the institutions formally dedicated to the exhibition of art revaluate their mission and scope? In other words, what is the future of showing for contemporary art?



Studio visit with Katie West: showing results of archival research and fieldwork. Zoom, October 2020. From top to bottom, left to right: Regina Pilawuk Wilson (artist), Miriam La Rosa (curator), Kara Rodski (Durrmu Arts, Project Coordinator), Fayen d'Evie (artist), Kade McDonald (Agency CEO), Katie West (artist). Image Courtesy: Durrmu Arts.

36 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (London: Routledge, 1990).

37 A comprehensive discussion on the gift would require a deeper analysis, which exceeds the context of this paper. Crucial references are the thought of Jacque Derrida and the publication *The gift* by Lewis Hyde. While the former addresses the aporia of hospitality occurring between host and guest, the latter looks at the gift as the creative spirit of the artist, to be understood as a circular and open form of exchange—rather than a one-to-one relationship of reciprocity. Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality, Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford [CA]: Stanford University Press, 2000). Jacques Derrida, "Hostipitality", *Angelaki* 5, no. 3 (2000): 3-18. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift. How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World* [1979], (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 2012).



Studio visit with Fayen d'Evie: presenting ideas for a project on sign language. November 2020. From top to bottom: Miriam La Rosa (curator), Regina Pilawuk Wilson (artist), Fayen d'Evie (artist), Katie West (artist). Image Courtesy: Durrmu Arts.

4. The Future of Ostension: Cross-cultural Showing and Collective Action

The pandemic, as well as social issues such as the Black Live Matter (BLM) movement, have made discussions on the future of museums more fervent than ever. In art institutions across the globe, significant appointments of professionals from minority groups have followed resignations from people in longstanding leadership positions. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) is a case in point, with directors leaving their posts in signs of protest or solidarity, and the development of a lengthy process to rethink the definition of the museum.[38] Likewise, the most powerful ostensive machine for contemporary art—biennials—has been challenged in all corners of the world due to lockdown measures and travel restrictions.[39] Museums, at best, have responded by turning themselves into containers for virtual exhibitions that, unfortunately, often look like SketchUp renderings or multiples of the Google Art Project. In the art market, collectors have begun to desert the vision of art as asset. As Michael Moses from ARTBnk argues, this trend has increased the divide between the "super-wealthy and everyone else", with the latter investing in red-chip names, brought to light by their social media presence, rather than blue-chip artists.[40]

Where art galleries were reopened with controlled attendance, blockbuster exhibits have been partially replaced by projects that attempt more intimate and subjective responses to the events of the past year. Should ostension be traded with action? I am thinking here of another 2020 tendency that followed the BLM revolts: the widespread removal of historical monuments, titles and names that were remnants of colonialism, and their substitution with new symbols of black identity and de-colonisation. But when I mention 'action' I am also thinking of that needed to put into practice, and sustain, the ideology of upheaval. As others have said before me, it is not enough to represent minority groups in art institutions by hiring new members of staff and diversifying exhibitions and collections.[41] This is only the much-needed first step of a longer journey that will require deep structural changes concerning the complexity of all aspects of daily life.

38
ICOM, Museum Definition: https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/, accessed January 2021.

39
Many biennials scheduled for 2020 and beyond have been postponed. Examples include Manifesta in Marseille and The Venice Biennale.

40
Scott Reyburn, "Blue-Chip Artists Move over, Here Come the Red Chips", *The Art Newspaper* (January 8, 2020). Available at: https://www.theartnewspaper.com/analysis/the-rush-for-red-chip-art, accessed January 2021.

41
Robin Pogrebin, "For Diversity Leaders in the Arts, Getting Hired Is Just the First Step", *The New York Times,* January 17, 2021.

With these considerations in mind, I turn back to the residency. In a recent online lecture, art historian Claire Bishop addressed the difference between activism and dissidence—the former manifesting in democratic societies and the latter in authoritarian states. What she calls "intervention" is an expression of dissent where the possibility of action is denied. "Intervention", Bishop says "cannot be curated as it is uninvited".[42] This implies that invitation—which is at the basis of the residency I theorise, as a mandatory feature for hospitality to take place—is instead an activity that can be institutionalised and organised (in other words curated) even if the process is ultimately driven by the artists' needs. Residency, I reiterate, is about inhabiting a context as much as taking an active part within it. Residents are not those who are merely *from* a place but also those who actively engage with that place's culture and society.

Revisiting the responses from and interactions amongst our three artists now, it is striking how the year 2020 proved particularly fruitful. Current events have not dramatically affected life in Peppimenarti and, as a consequence, Wilson's work. However, prior to the pandemic, the community used to periodically receive visitors and Wilson was busy travelling both nationally and overseas to deliver workshops and lectures, and to exhibit her work. The artist found herself able to finally concentrate on her art without the impediment of compulsory travel outside of the Northern Territory. In the case of d'Evie, lockdown meant she was no longer required to commute daily from her home in regional Victoria to Melbourne, allowing her to re-organise her routine around a stronger engagement with Dja Dja Wurrung Country through regular walks, home schooling and art-making in the bush. Likewise, West relocated to Western Australia, an occasion to dive into local archives to retrieve and study the history of her homeland.

Projects like Marrgu favour connection between geographically, socially and politically distant places, including remote areas, therefore giving further opportunities to artists located outside of urban centres for their art to be present and to be presented. In the case of Indigenous art, and senior artists like Wilson, this is a meaningful achievement. It means that Wilson can potentially participate in various activities without renouncing to her obligations on Country. Indeed, alongside being a practicing artist, Wilson runs all cultural events at the Art Centre, manages the local club and performs her traditional and ceremonial duties as a matriarch in the community. For d'Evie and West these types of projects can open up further avenues for cross-cultural connection and on-site artistic experimentation, away from the urban art contexts they are used to engaging with. Marrgu therefore reinforces the thought that art does not need to be brought *out of the bush* to a museum in order to be seen and acknowledged.

More widely, I propose that the future of ostension for non-Western artists and practices in a globalised digital world can benefit from the new understanding we have gained of online connectivity. Whilst the value of physical travel and in-person exchange cannot ever be replaced, the pandemic has forced us to explore the capacity of virtual interaction at a higher, and hopefully more effective, level. Online displays bear the advantage of enhancing minority representation and working in a ubiquitous mode. However, there are also downsides. Access to the internet and digital technologies is not equal everywhere. In the case of Australia, this problem is especially evident. Art Centres located in remote areas have very poor connectivity and often rely on the presence of non-Indigenous art workers to accomplish tech-based tasks. Wilson, for instance, can connect to the internet only at the Art Centre—which requires her to walk from her home, often under unpleasant weather conditions. She also needs assistance to join Zoom meetings, does not post on Instagram by herself and is still reachable mostly only by phone. So, is the 'new contemporary art normal'—where the digital is inevitable and no longer a mere artistic potential—just another instance of the 21st century's pathways to exclu-

42
Claire Bishop "Interventions: The Art of Political Timing", in *Archipelagic Encounters: An online symposium* produced in collaboration between McNally School of Fine Arts, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore and the Centre of Visual Art, University of Melbourne, Australia (November 5, 2020).

sion and polarisation? In posing this question I am not alone. In "XR Review", *The Art Newspaper*'s column on Art and Technology, artist Gretchen Andrew advances similar concerns. "Meaning is always added and lost by the digitisation process" she claims, and "This impacts the moral rights of artists".[43] Her statement speaks to the vulnerability of practitioners who are now suddenly expected to engage with digital technologies to make art accessible, when physical travelling for their work is not possible. In the case of non-Western art and ancestral cultural practices, the switch to the digital is not always an easy route. With some exceptions—the Mulka Project in the community of Yirrkala, in Arnhem Land, is one of them—the vast majority of Art Centres in Australia still experience digital isolation.[44] Wilson is part of the advisory committee of Agency, an organisation that fosters ethical investments to promote Indigenous-led projects, both locally and across different countries.[45] Agency is developing remarkable initiatives to generate a lasting impact for the sustainability and growth of the Indigenous art industry. Yet, their work also shows that the support and investment needed in this direction continues to be vast, and demands cooperation between different types of institutions, including government and the private sector. Once again, the route to equity is tortuous and requires a collective effort and sustained, organised action.

So how will we deal with, and define, the impact of enforced digitisation in the new ostensive condition of art? Can we begin to understand ostension as the act of hosting rather than showing? The Marrgu digital residency—with its approach in favour of an art that can travel, slowly, across cultures, that is taken down from the pedestal and turned into a more familiar and family-oriented symbol of exchange—is an attempt to deal with these questions. As much as I would like to further deconstruct the issues raised in this paper, I am also aware that the temporal distance is currently not enough for me to analyse what is occurring in a comprehensive way. Considerations and statements, at this stage, still partly function at the level of prediction. I wonder whether the present needs to become history in order to meaningfully *present* itself to us. Undoubtedly, though, cross-cultural exchange and collective action have to take place to challenge those systems and structures, which belong to a limited vision of the past and, as such, no longer serve us.

5. What conclusions?

Writing a set of concluding remarks for a project that has not yet reached its completion is an arduous task. The Marrgu digital residency started in September 2020 and does not have a fixed end date. Parameters and goals are unfolding, slowly, in respect to participants' needs and desires, which are in a state of flux. With no surprise, this tendency reflects the spirit of the time, which does not allow for fast forward planning and instead asks us to be considerate of what and when we can *project*. Throughout this paper, I have attempted to provide an overview of the changing relationship with contemporary art, and its display, in the new normal conditions of the pandemic age. Taking Marrgu as a case study, I have addressed some of the challenges that the post-2020 artworld is being presented with. Among (if not on top of) these challenges, there is a crisis of showing: a dramatic change of scenario whereby all art forms and mediums are migrating somewhat to the land

43
The Art Newspaper's XR Panel "Disembodied Behaviors: An Ultra-Real Virtual Art Show that Sears the Mind-Haze of 2020's Unending March Back to a State of Clarity", *The Art Newspaper* (January 15, 2020). Available at: https://www.theartnewspaper.com/review/disembodied-behaviors-review-the-art-newspaper-xr-panel, accessed January 2021.

44
The Mulka Project: https://yirrkala.com/about-the-mulka-project/, accessed January 2021. Indigo Holcombe James, *Coronavirus: As Culture Moves Online, Regional Organisations Need Help Bridging the Digital Divide* (2020), https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-as-culture-moves-online-regional-organisations-need-help-bridging-the-digital-divide-135050, accessed January 2021.

45
Agency: https://agencyprojects.org, accessed January 2021.

of the virtual. Whilst this place may appear—even promise—from a distance to be one of equality and union, it bares the danger of perpetuating those dynamics of division and exclusion that exist in, and permeate, the land we once knew as *the real*.

So I will go back and borrow from the quote reported at the beginning of this text by Umberto Eco, which in English reads: "Ostension represents the most elementary act of *active signification* and it is the one used in the first instance by two people who do not share the same language".[46] This sentence encapsulates the essence of the ostension I have tried to imagine and theorise here. Going back to the roots for me, a Derrida lover, also requires us to deconstruct the world through the words we use to describe it, looking at their journey: where they are now and where they came from. Hence, I have framed ostension as a potential relative of hosting, proposing it as an act of connection rather than one of display—as an art that travels—between peoples (in our context, artists) located in different corners of the globe and therefore speaking different languages (culturally as much as in their art). I have wondered whether, through the digital, a new ostensive condition of contemporary art could function as an avenue for showing more substantially, and for better representing non-Western art and art that derives from ancestral cultural practices. Ultimately, I have hoped for ostension to become synonymous with action. By now we will agree that my conclusions may function, more effectively, as questions. So I will end these remarks by asking: has the pandemic challenged the ontology of residencies to the point of confronting the very purpose of art? Is it not the scope of art to probe, shake and interrogate? Let's not set this aside when we try to display it.

46
Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 225.

Author's Biography

Miriam La Rosa is an independent curator and PhD Candidate at the University of Melbourne. Her research looks at notions of gift-exchange and host-guest relationships in the context of the artist residency, with the South as a geopolitical focus. As part of this research trajectory, in 2019, she co-curated a cross-cultural exchange project through residencies between Sicily (Italy), Gippsland and Peppimenarti (Australia). She is a Graduate Fellow of the Centre of Visual Arts (CoVA) and Treasurer of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) Australia. She has contributed to projects in the Education, Public Program, and Exhibition departments of institutions including Whitechapel Gallery, London (for the 2015 exhibition *Rivane Neuenschwander: The Name of Fear*), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (for the 2015 exhibition *ZERO: Let Us Explore the Stars*), and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (for the 2013 exhibitions *Sheela Gowda: Open Eye Policy and Piero Gilardi – Samen Werken*).