

# A RADICAL FRIENDSHIP OF DIFFERENCE

Patricia Healy McMeans

## ACT ONE

Throughout histories, artists have actively changed the normative structures they find themselves in. Sometimes through circumstance, sometimes in a dogged effort to carve out a position and place from which to begin new modes of being, living and making work. The impetus for this can be identifying problematic situations in their patriarchal world and creating fractures within it in order to make space for others; it can also be more internal, a personal singular need for the artist alone to act, to make a schism for themselves. It can be an almost violent gesture, a chink in the broad wall of hegemony that surrounds us. In all events, it is a risky endeavour, indeed. It often centres an ethos of generosity, and a stretching out to other like-minded sojourners once at the precipice of taking that first brave step, and then for many steps thereafter.

My research journey has led to questioning how a radical friendship of difference plays such a part in this kind of inclined support during the origination of revolutionary acts. I've discovered it is often *not* the closest bosom buddies, the oldest friend, or even comrades in one's same locality that provide the inclined support necessary, but rather respected friendships of difference that remain at some distance throughout the endeavour. After all, only when we look across the valley at each other, can we see the other whole against the sky.

Coming to mind is the historical example of friendship between established educator and renowned experiential learning theorist John Dewey, and the upstart professor John Andrew Rice, who established Black Mountain College (BMC) in North Carolina just four months after being fired from Rollins College in 1933. Rice spent that summer working every connection and recruiting 22 students, several faculty, a cook, a secretary, and a farmer in order to manifest a start-up school that enacted the learning-by-doing principles that Dewey had espoused for years.<sup>1</sup> The two had been in the same academic conference circuits on Education in America, and held a respect for each other's viewpoints. Taking a risk that first summer on Black Mountain, Rice was fueled by reasoned encouragement from his friend, and periodically checked back in, through letters and visits during those first fledgling years. The elder Dewey, at 77, visited while BMC still held an innocence and freshness described as "yeasty," and a "tight little world."<sup>2</sup> He was measured, quiet, and thoughtful, wishing to disappear into the student body while, contrastingly, the younger Socratic lecturer Rice, at 45, was a charismatic preacher's nephew. Though very different, the two corresponded through letters for years to come, ruminating on democratic models of learning, attention and care.

This kind of auspicious friendship — of respected *difference* — of like-minded sojourners looking to undergo the unknown, is an example of how

<sup>1</sup> Harris, Mary Emma. *The Arts at Black Mountain College*. MIT Press, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Ted Drier, 8 May 1971, Ca39, BMC Project.

revolutionary artists find inclined support from a constellation of actors — a friendship *which endures*, which serves as both a trusted ballast and barometer for the one breaking ground.<sup>3</sup>

Following this research, I investigate ways in which artists-led residencies today form themselves around the needs and care for the time of the artist's life, beginning to change the major known superstructure of the residency field, i.e. demanding displacement, exploitative work, and fostering elitism, by working the minor from within. I focus on two women artist-led residencies: Wassaic Project, instigated in 2008 by friends Bowie Zunino and Eve Biddle in rural New York, and, in an entirely different context, the collective Le 18, co-founded by Laila Hida in the medina of Marrakesh, Morocco.<sup>4</sup> Through present-day interviews, these women generously share their origin stories, what expectations they had, which needs were met, and how their support needs have shifted over time. I ask: *Who or what holds up whom? What does the future look like?*

## ACT TWO: WASSAIC, NEW YORK

The bucolic hamlet of Wassaic sits 90 miles north of New York City, or under 2.5 hours by the Harlem Line train. On the edge of town, and the tallest building for many miles, a 150-year-old wooden grain mill proudly stands. Auspiciously, the Maxon Mill was loaned to young sculptor Bowie Zunino in 2008 by her father and his business partner, preservation architects who were approached by local citizens with a proposal to save it from demolition and renovate the building. The Wassaic Project first began as a 'free festival' of contemporary music and art for two scrappy summers, when Bowie and her co-investigators and friends Eve Biddle, and filmmaker Elan Bogarin, were in their early 20s. Wassaic Project has now become a multi-faceted art and living, or art-as-living, parainstitution, from a thoughtful project that was at first meant to be temporary.

Recently, while interviewing co-directors Bowie and Eve, Bowie candidly connected her own situation of being a young artist in the early 2000s New York scene, a cancer survivor, an art student, and a uniquely positioned child of both the City and a rural village in Kent, CT, just ten minutes from Wassaic, as part of the constellation which made this project happen. "Every time we weren't in school, we were up here," she describes, with deep respect for those living in these small towns. "It *does* matter." Eventually in 2014, they would also run the renovated local Lantern bar and grill, which has served hundreds of soaked and/or sunburnt summer festival-goers. With a packed band schedule and "fields and fields of tents," the popular festivals, reminiscent of a small-scale Woodstock,

<sup>3</sup> We can look to friendships of difference underpinning other renowned ground-breakers: American feminist artist Judy Chicago and French/Cuban (later American) writer Anais Nin, from wildly different social upbringings and 35 years apart, mutually supported each other through close friendship, advocating each other's life practice and work; Chicago's infamous feminist *Dinner Party* (1974-79) piece bookends Nin's death from cancer in 1977 at the age of 73.

<sup>4</sup> Wassaic Project now has eight staff positions, including three fellowships (Sculpture, Printmaking, and Programming), multiple buildings, and run various residencies all year long. Over ten years, 1,500+ creatives and 34,000+ visitors have passed through their doors. Please see <https://www.wassaicproject.org/>; <https://www.wassaicproject.org/about/who-we-are/bowie-zunino/>; <https://www.wassaicproject.org/about/who-we-are/eve-biddle/>. The Le 18 project in Marrakesh invites artists to reside year round, and, among other things, has been a part of Documenta 15 curated by Ruangrupa through harnessing the ethos of lumbung, or collective self-governance. Have a look at <https://www.le18marrakech.com/>; <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/lumbung-members-artists/le-18/>; <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/laila-hida-apollo-40-under-40-africa-the-patrons/>.

continued for ten years. However, the artists' residency, established at the height of the recession, really took hold in 2010, when Bowie and her husband and early co-director Jeff Barnett-Winsby decided to move their lives up to Wassaic, permanently.

Bowie describes the start of it as “us three women at first, and I was finishing up my first year of grad school, and, immediately, I panicked that I had wanted to make a difference, that I had wanted to have a life of service.” After spending nine years working with special needs children at a non-profit called the GO Project in Manhattan, her work cut off early whilst undergoing cancer treatment, and she found herself at a crossroads. Her undergraduate classmate Eve, whose own mother had died of cancer, leaned in. “Eve really was not frightened,” Bowie describes. “She just was like, I’m here. What can I do? Let’s do this. You’re okay. Our friendship was based on that shared experience.”

The attitude of ‘Let’s do this’ was pervasive, and came to manifest in only a few short years as the Wassaic Project. What follows are excerpts of our interview:

BZ When I got to [postgraduate] school at RISD [Rhode Island School of Design], I pretty quickly felt that I knew enough of the art world that I knew I wasn’t cut for it. Being neurodivergent with ADHD and not great at doing what I was supposed to do, I didn’t quite fit into any mould, and was not great at socialising. Creating the Wassaic Project wasn’t so much about what I saw that the world needed, but what I needed to cut out for myself. I knew I wasn’t good at playing the “10 curators that you want to get in front of” game, and that made me panic. I was really curious why creative worlds had so many different sorts of ethos, like the generosity that was *present* at the late 90s-early 2000s music festivals, and from the LA art world, where there were children at openings, to the cutthroat New York City art world where, if you’re a woman, you lied if you had children. I was also paying attention to how graduate schools and residencies seemed to be set up to destroy people’s personal lives. For example, Skowhegan didn’t allow anyone to visit you or even call on the phone, for three months. I thought, whatever I’ve been trying to build in my life, why would I want that? I don’t want to blow up my life.

When we created the Wassaic Project residency here, we were taking elements of what we really valued. We felt very strongly: if you have a partner, bring them. If you’ve got a job, bring it. This should not be a programme that *we* wouldn’t be able to do ourselves. Still, to this day, we at Wassaic have no expectations of what you make, how often you are here when you are a resident, how you use your space, because it’s *your* time.

You are the best judge of who you are, and what you need at this moment.

The first summer’s music festival was “launched by throwing a giant party with no plan,” Eve describes. “Dreams galore! But no plan.” It included art installations, dance, music and film, in part because of being propped up by



← fig.1 Jeff Barnett-Winsby, Eve Biddle, Bowie Zunino at the Festival in 2010. Photo courtesy of Wassaic Project.

friends adjacent to the trio. For example, a special needs co-teacher from Bowie’s past named Charmaine Warren, then a dancer at Alvin Ailey, said to her over dinner one night, “Well, can I bring dancers?” Then, her childhood friend who was studying Film at NYU, asked, “Well, can I curate film?” Bowie describes, “It was about being able to say Yes to people around you.” Early support came organically, with many artist friends pitching in, to family friends who would give \$100, to chatting with strangers on a random ski lift; “it was a hustle, for sure,” Bowie explains. “In the early days, my parents supported us by letting us use the buildings, which Wassaic Project now owns, and they were connected in the non-profit philanthropy world. Much of the early days was just getting in front of people and talking about what we do — circles just keep growing, circles just keep growing.”

BZ Early on, I discovered that — *up here* is actually so connected to the art world that I would never have been involved in in New York City. All of a sudden, I’d be at a potluck in the towns around here, and [art critic] Roberta Smith was there, and all these important people. At one of those after-show dinners, I met an artist named Carl d’Avila, and he jokes now, ‘you were either just, so young, and so nuts, this is either going to happen by sheer force of will. Or these kids are just, so *naive*.’ And then he joined our Board.



←fig.2 The Mill. Photo courtesy of Wassaic Project.

Fascinatingly, Bowie began Wassaic because she knew the ‘art world’, as presented to her, wasn’t going to be for her. And then, just three years later, that art world *came to her*, on her own terms, and offering its own reinforcement.

Quickly, it became apparent that some of the directorship would have to commit to residing in Wassaic full-time; in 2009 the triad of women co-investigators shifted, with Elan stepping away to pursue filmmaking (though she is still a trusted advisor) and Jeff replacing her, as it remains today. Each of them acts as a barometer for the other, sizing up what needs to be done, and understanding each other’s changing capacities. “There was a time that Jeff was the chef at the Lantern, and what he was capable of doing was not the same as what he was capable of doing prior to that, and after that,” Bowie reflects. For them, the larger project is the goal, and they have set egos aside for equality, including titles and pay. “It needs to be equal, because we are a unit right now, and if we start dividing that unit, in any way, things will shift and become — it’s not *my* problem. So, right now, it’s *always* our problem. Whatever it is, it’s all *three* of our problems.”

This goes for new challenges such as capital grant funding, a door that has opened with recent ownership of their buildings. Eve, the founding fundraiser, says one of her recent joys is finding reflexive support from the artists who have gone through Wassaic, simply because *they* are now on funders’ radar, which makes her job easier. “They reflect it back to me,” she says. Further, she is bolstered by the sixteen Board members, whom she “calls, not emails, *a lot*.” Their tight circle makes it so that she can reach her arm out to the shoulders of staffers at other residencies whom they “call on the regular.”

Now that they all have children, since 2019, they’ve dedicated a year-round house to a Family Residency programme, or more accurately, a caregiving and care-receiving residency, defined as for anyone who either their life requires them to receive care or give care and, in doing that, needs other people around. Bowie describes, “and, often, that does look like a family.”

From the beginning, Bowie and Eve have been checking in. “We check in with ourselves and ask what kind of world we want to be in, and then it goes from there.”

### ACT THREE: Le 18, Marrakech, Morocco

In a traditional riyadh on leafy Derb El Ferrane, a three-room house is situated in the medina of Marrakesh. *It is having its third life*, since 2013 as an artists-run space and residency project called Le 18 (Le Dix-Huit), pronounced in French “luh-dee-szwee.” Laila Hida, one of the founders, is likely not here, though other people will be milling about the house, having a coffee and going into the fridge, or perhaps Francesca Masoero, the oldest partner, is preparing a dinner for those ‘neighbours’ up on the rooftop. Laila can be found at her favourite small coffee shop in the city, listening to the old men in conversation. She says, “*I enjoy not doing what we are supposed to do, but just sitting and being, listening to what’s in front of me.*” It is late June, and everyone who’s a part of Le 18 will be leaving in July, possibly for the coast or to do their own projects, and then, like all of the Mediterranean region, Le 18 will close for August.

It’s important to note that, since 2013, Le 18 as a collective of people, began with and is centred, still, inside of this House. The House has its own history and past lives, Laila explains. It’s always been a private house, never for tourism or as a public guest house; a house that was kept for artist friends or friends of friends coming to Marrakech from everywhere. Its first life was with an artistic family, and then a singer produced an album here, and then it came to Laila through an ex-partner, who asked her to bring it back to *open use*, again. “The energy is in this house,” Laila describes, “I believe places hold a certain energy.” Initially, when Le 18 was new, *everything* happened in these three rooms: hosting, artists eating, sleeping, working, public shows, events, raves, and so on. Now, the artist-residents sleep elsewhere and the House is a basis for art, a bit of office, and living.

Laila will say, her biggest learning is that *It has created Itself, by Itself*. “The project came out of it. We learned everything by doing, *not reproducing*. I appreciate meeting people who pass by spontaneously and allowing things to open up. *Everyone who comes here shapes and reshapes it.*”

In the beginning, she began having conversations with her neighbours and friends brainstorming the possibilities of what she, and they, could do with the House. Le 18 has witnessed an acceleration of the gentrification in Marrakesh that had started in the late 90s, when the first Westerners started to advance opportunities in the tourism industry, and could see the social fracture starting in 2010. While she was preparing the space, one of her ‘new town’ Gueliz neighbours, an American named Mel Bernstein, was sharing his stories of living in New York City in his twenties during the time of Andy Warhol’s Factory, and it was he who curated the very first event: a screening of films including Warhol and Kenneth Anger, before they had even decided to name the space. “We were five people, in the beginning,” as Laila describes the first event, an occasion at which a very limited group of friends were invited.

From then on, the House was filled with “neighbours”, a term Laila uses in reference to artists and friends from communities across Marrakech, evenings of happenings and poetry. Laila reflects, “We changed shows every two weeks, which was a lot. We were experimenting. We showed young



← fig.3 Le 18, Marrakesh, Morocco. Photo courtesy of Le 18.

artists, people who did not have access to galleries, because galleries at that time were still showing only modern art and established Moroccan artists.” In the past years, however, young artists now seek their first experience at Le18, and *then* are sought after by the galleries. “This generation has started a movement to create their own power, to challenge the normative model.” She describes how in Morocco, the museums are not questioned, and small temporary collectives make space for *what can be*. “Through tactics such as occupying spaces,” she explains, “those in the movement are not producing, but existing.” Le 18 has made people feel like *this is possible*.

Originally from Casablanca, Laila moved to Marrakech in 2011 after living in Paris for several years, working as a junior producer and assistant of art directors of fashion magazines. Two years later, Le 18 began. In those two years, she was “learning how to get along with the city.” She describes, “I had a few friends already, and I was in the right place at the right time.” There was a moment when art was booming, after the Marrakesh Biennial in 2006, which was more event-driven than building long term relationships and projects. “I was missing spaces where you feel you’re a part of a community you want to share with,” she reflects.

She looked to create a space for experimentation and art production that holds certain concerns about the city, its systems, and tries to fill the missing pieces of art and history. For her, this formed organically. She called a librarian friend, Hicham Bouzid, from Tangiers who became a ballast for her; they worked together for several years, doing important work that focusses on transformation of the city.<sup>5</sup> At Le 18, they “are flexible

<sup>5</sup> For more information, please visit: <https://www.think-tanger.com/>; <https://www.friendsoffriends.com/profiles/tangier-hicham-bouzid-curator/>.

→ fig.4 Le 18, Marrakesh, Morocco. Photo courtesy of Le 18.



and agile and know the city really really well, and have been good at understanding the underlying architecture behind social movements.”

Here in the House, ownership is shared. Laila describes, “You don’t really know who runs the space,” and they prefer it that way. “We don’t have one frame. We don’t have to agree,” she articulates. “Hierarchy and decision-making is a place to challenge. I’m interested in figuring out the power of the situation; we want to challenge the systems of how it works in the world, to experience an alternative way of being a group.”

They have survived these ten years because they found strategies to overcome precarity. Most collaborative projects have emerged from the team, “but *they’ve been emancipated from the space*”, she says. Meaning, they happen elsewhere in the city and the world now, such as a trans-national exchange with Glasgow this year, run by Qanat Collective (curated by Francesca Masoero), and participation in Documenta 15, invited by the group Ruangrupa, which focused on the notion of *lumbung* (‘collectively governed place’). Le 18 “went through a lot of craziness with that, it was complicated and critical.” Laila confides, “It can trigger some things and unveil all the problems.” She asks, “What are the problems behind ‘producing a culture’? The same challenges are all here: infrastructure and models.”

*Thinking of past and future lives*, she says, “Le 18 will not last forever, and isn’t meant to.” By this, she means that she believes in the *impulse* of the group. If it doesn’t last, others will continue, because they’ve experienced the potential of working collectively and this is “always going to be the way for those who want to stand before the mainstream and the system.” At the end, though, people are not wanting to leave the project. “We’ve built something living, in common, and we can do it, still. This is where we were accurate,” she says.

<sup>6</sup> 10XArtRes is a discursive residency which bridges the gap between academia and the real world. It is a place for serious artists of rigour to take a step back from the Hustle and take time for experimentation, research, and living. It is also a mode of practice. Ideas, like people, sometimes need another chance to find their groove. Give them three. Give them ten. For more information please visit: [www.tenchancesartres.org/](http://www.tenchancesartres.org/); <https://10xartres.com/artists-in-residency/>; <https://10xartresphdportfolio.com/>.

<sup>7</sup> Manning, Erin. *The Minor Gesture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> “Through our difference, Katinka is one of my most trusted friends. On this trip, we would about kill each other, stepping measuredly outside the silent car to have it out next to a dirty roadhouse on the coastal 1, each threatening to hop a plane home at the next city. Tahoe, Las Vegas, it didn’t even matter. We’d have spent our last cent of meager adjunct pay to get out. We were sunburnt and salty, having eaten only what roadside shacks could offer in that last nine days. We pitched out tents in the dark by now, through muscle memory and fugitive planning.” from *Lived Residencies, Experiential Learning and Thick Geographies: How Artists Produce Knowledge(s) in the Social Studio* PhD dissertation, 2022, Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh, p.43, accessed on <https://era.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/39006>.

This journey of research has reinforced my understanding of social structures, how a radical friendship of difference, at a distance, from an undergraduate classmate to an ex-lover to our 'neighbours' to a librarian friend in a different city, can serve to provide the reassurance we need to step off the precipice of a courageous act and breathe (new) life into a place. In my own lived experience, my friend of many differences, Katinka Galanos, serves this purpose; once upon a time in 2011, we were on a down-and-dirty road trip across the Western half of America to the California Coast, and she was the ballast to my discovery that I, in my 42nd year, an artist in my own right, needed to start an artists' residency, one that served mothers and fathers and workers who had jobs. One that paid artists for their intellectual and emotional labour. This became Ten Chances, No Hustle Artists' Residency, or 10XArtRes, based out of Minneapolis and sometimes Edinburgh, which now serves a past resident alumni network of over 50 international artists spanning the U.S., Scotland, England, and Zurich, Switzerland.<sup>6</sup>

She encouraged me to also centre my residency project around a 1-1 domestic hosting situation, a slow immersion, wherein each "guest" or out-of-town resident is hosted by a "local" resident in *their own homes* for the duration of the residency. This intimate and radical exchange has formed lasting bonds of friendship between pairs of artists, strengthened the nucleus of the entire residency group, and is itself the seeds for changing the major by working the minor from within.<sup>7</sup> But, it all goes back to having finally arrived at the California coast in the midst of a seriously contentious road trip, smoking a rollie on the hood of my Prius together, and nervously seeing Katinka's expression of question and confidence when I boldly asked her, *What If I...?*<sup>8</sup>

What reverberates from this ongoing research into radical friendships are the sentiments that surface across all three acts: a feeling like you are missing something or not cut out for it; a spirit of generosity; being respectful of others; beginning a thing that is meant to be temporary; and *artists not doing what they are supposed to do*. In the case of Black Mountain College, John Dewey and John Rice describe this as a collision of the everyday, not in harmony but in dissensus; only in living in response-ability to others in the contested social sphere, we are pushed to make ourselves accountable, trusted, and trustworthy.

Patricia Healy McMeans is an artist, researcher, co-creator, educator, and mother, currently living and working in Minneapolis, with one foot (always) in Scotland.

She holds an MFA from the University of Minnesota in Sculpture and Combined Media, and her PhD in Contemporary Art Practice at Edinburgh College of Art studying how artists learn peer-to-peer while on residency. Since 2020, she has been a collaborative founder of the ARRC study collective, strengthened to now very fruitful and radical friendships amongst peers of difference.

## ONE WHO EATS BREAD WITH ANOTHER

### A CONVERSATION ON COMPANIONSHIP

Eléonore Pano-Zavaroni and Kathrin Wolkowicz

Eléonore and Kathrin share a friendship dating back to an artist in residency period in Prague, where they coincidentally met at an opening. As they are now based in different cities, Lyon and Rotterdam, the majority of their ongoing relationship happens through online channels, although they prefer to spend time together in a physical space. "Speaking-thinkingly," Eléonore and Kathrin furnish their in-between space by reading each other's texts, reflecting their works in progress amongst discussing language phenomena.<sup>1</sup> Their mutual support is also public, for example, in textual contributions to each other's publications and recently in a collaborative exhibition in an artist-run space in Rotterdam. In the following conversation, they prowl around the multiple dimensions of bread and its echoes in their approach to their artistic practice.

Kathrin Wolkowicz (KW) When looking at the text that we're making here/now, I hope, it's like sitting at the table, having a conversation trying to dive into some things, rather than explaining how things are.

Eléonore Pano-Zavaroni (EPZ) Yeah, as reading the text needs to be conceived as an experience, not a representation.



KW I remember our time in Prague. The brick-shaped bread that I brought into our residency's kitchen and the astonishment and contrast to the nice crepes that you made in the mornings. The brick-bread is like a landmark-object, something I like to think about.

EPZ I remember, I used to call your bread «brick-bread». Because it is heavy, compact, dense, with a plain and dark colour. Also a slightly sour taste.

Years after, I realised that the brick-bread is life. It literally contains life.

It is crazy because if you put the bread in water, you can transform it again into a mass and then make a cake, for example. But the industrial effect on the making of bread, and using more and more refined flours, makes it less nutritious. In the 19th century, for instance, if you ate some bread, the brick-bread actually worked as a

whole meal because there were so many good things in it.

Good bacteria that actually transforms the gluten in it and makes it energising and healthy for the body to absorb.

I like how bread is a way to understand so many issues of our contemporary time.



<sup>1</sup> The term "Speaking-thinkingly" refers to a mode of exchange in the friendship between Hannah Ahrendt and Mary Mc Carthy.