

# How Not to Exclude Artist Mothers (and other parents)

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Hot Topics in the Art World

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Residency in Motherhood, the structure, intention and support are important in themselves, and are elements of a residency that an artist can benefit from even if they cannot be physically present for the full period.

For artists who wish to undertake a residency with their children, Robertson suggests host organisations might offer an allocation of family-friendly residencies during school holidays: 'Several artist families can stay at once, not "disturbing" other artists. The potential to share childcare would make this an economic way of supporting several artist parents at once.'

Artists who had previously snuck children and partners in to join them on prestigious residencies felt they would not have been accepted onto the programme had they mentioned their family at the point of application. Showing willing is perhaps the first and fundamental step for host organisations interested in becoming parent-friendly. Don't leave it to the artist to raise the issue as though she is confessing to a shameful secret: take it upon yourself to ask whether the artist is a parent and wishes to bring children or partner. Make it evident that the artist's status as a parent won't prejudice their application to the residency. Be transparent about what costs the host organisation is able to cover.<sup>2</sup>

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Magdalena Bielez, based in Warsaw, has attended so many residencies in Poland and beyond in the nine years since the birth of her son Maurycy that we might consider her a veteran in this particular field. 'The residency stays are very important and creative. I feel the need to change my perspective more often than before when I didn't have a family', she explains. Her family travels together for her residencies. 'It is good to think that having a child is just the natural next step in your life. Something you have to deal with and go along. Acceptance is the only way to go forward.'

Bielez helped our How Not to Exclude Artist Parents manifesto group with expert advice for both artists and hosts on how to make the

experience work. She certainly endorses the practice of breaking longer residencies into a series of short stays – and has done so successfully with the Laznia Centre For Contemporary Art in Gdańsk – though suggests this is only practical if the host institution is nearby. Artists wanting to undertake a residency with their child or children will need a second pair of hands:

The presence of your partner while having a residency with a younger child is necessary – even obligatory. There are many possible scenarios for dividing a 24-hour period when each of the parents is taking care of a child. If I am going to a residency with my family, I need a shared family room, but also a small studio room, preferably right next door – to work at night. A dedicated children's corner is welcome, for example a desk and a chair to make the child/children feel part of this residency. During my stay in Argentina, I had my own desk in the studio, but next to it there was a lower desk for my son who was drawing and playing with cars. Thanks to this, even during the day it was possible to work with the child. Children follow their parents, so it's good to show sometimes that the parent needs to focus and do something, and make the child a replica of her workplace. [When we travelled for a month-long residency in Argentina,] my husband was working remotely for the first two weeks and had a vacation for the next two weeks. We adjusted it so that, for example, he could look after the child when I was getting ready for the exhibition opening.

As I was finishing work on this book, Bielesz and her family had just arrived in the UK for the first in a series of four short residencies at Aplpip Arts in North Dorset. The hosts shared pictures of the family settling quickly into creative activities: after many years now of working alongside (and often collaborating with) his mother, Maurycy too has become a veteran of the artist residency.



Fans of Japanese monster movies will warm to Toronto-based collective MOTHRA, named after an ancient moth goddess that makes regular appearances in the Godzilla films. 'Although not necessarily attracted to bright lights at night, we parents of young humans are often up and active during the dark hours like our moth friends', says founding member Sarah Cullen. MOTHRA is as much a creative project as it is a collective, and the group publishes a zine, exhibits together and agitates around the rights of caregivers. Since 2018, one of their most popular enterprises has been an artist residency at Artscape Gibraltar Point (AGP), an arts complex in an old school building on Toronto Island. 'I was really determined to start something that would help make a change and normalize the presence of children in the studio (or boardroom) floor', says Cullen. She already had a studio at AGP, and proposed that the centre might host 'a residency where artists can bring their children, in fact, in order to come they *must* bring their children'.

As with Mother House Studios – visited in Chapter 3 – the MOTHRA residency is integrated, founded in a belief that an artist can work with or alongside their child. This is not a residency with a childcare provision, though artists are welcome to work out childcare cooperatively. The model is not uncontroversial – Cullen has had to face detractors even within the wider artist parent community. 'We are interested in learning how art and parenting are transformed when brought into relation this way', says Cullen. 'I think that the real anarchists, the real transgression in the art world is to show up with your baby. Coco Fusco said in a panel discussion at Art Basel that the art world would rather tolerate a drunk artist at an art opening than a child or baby.'

For MOTHRA, the big challenge in setting up the residency has not been babyproofing, or kitting the studios out with toys and changing mats; it has been negotiating how to bring children into a shared residency complex. There are other artists at AGP: some come for a period of quiet focus, others enjoy the energy children bring to the building. Cullen feels that 98 per cent of the residents and staff are now supportive of MOTHRA's project, but it has taken diplomacy and