Spin Slowly, Fighting Gravity

by Samuel Walsh

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When I first arrived in Portugal, Joe told me a story.

'If you started digging a hole,' he said, pointing to the ground, 'you'll end up in New Zealand'.

This sentiment would become a thread, a wobbly bridge between my temporary home in Zaratan in Lisbon and my permanent one in Strange Haven in Auckland – two art spaces nestled literally on opposite sides of the world.

As a non-artist (I'm more of a facilitator or a lurker), an artist residency can be scary. You feel clumsy, imposter-ish, out of your depth. But what started as small glimpses or subtle clues, soon became larger, more obvious linkages, and an unfamiliar place became familiar and strangers, friends.

To help make sense of my time there I've picked away at a couple of these linkages. Some are vague, others more obvious but, when molded together, these form an experience.

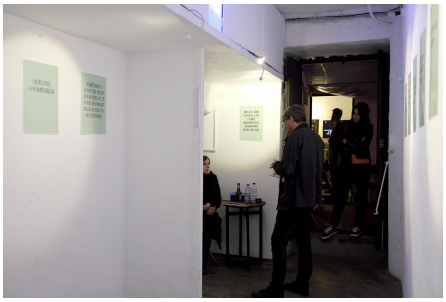
> *Without viewing our work alongside thousands of others, the community we carry with us is always a coming community, a horizon, a theoretical community. How can we collapse a theory of community into shared space and time? This text is one way, and the platform that carries it, the community that*

receives it, the voices, texts and tools that distribute it. Can we reflect on our position and connect, and, by doing so, become a community at present? In this act, we not only imagine alternate modes, but embody them.

- James McNally



Spin Slowly Fighting Gravity show at Zaratan, 2018. Courtesy of Zaratan.



Spin Slowly Fighting Gravity show at Zaratan, 2018. Courtesy of Zaratan.



View of Lisbon from across the bridge. Photo: Samuel Walsh



Zaratan, Lisbon.

Once the site of a small charcoal factory and then (upon the arrival of electricity) a Bodega, Zaratan – Arte Contemporânea is a not-for-profit art space, run by a collective of ten artists in the heart of Lisbon, Portugal. The ground floor space is made up of a series of galleries, a cave-like live venue, an art shop, a small bar and a

courtyard, while upstairs sits a two-bedroom apartment and studio space for residents.

While the differences between Zaratan and Strange Haven (a project space I run in Tāmaki) are obvious; Zaratan double us in age, size and stature, the first linkage I stumbled upon was unexpected: infrastructure. A scattering of the same foldable plastic chairs, DIY fittings, repurposed gadgetry, plain objects tasked with multiple uses, leafy plants to cover cracks, some wall space and a PA. This simplistic, budget-driven practicality made Zaratan feel familiar to me, homely even, in a way I hadn't anticipated. But it was the sparkly bits, the things I hadn't considered, that helped spawn new notions.

After applying for a series of open calls in Europe, I was offered residencies in both Berlin and Lisbon and chose Zaratan because it was an artist-run initiative (ARI) and not an institution. An element of my research project (and in many ways the catalyst for being in Lisbon) was to investigate how independent art spaces operate overseas so I could learn from, steal from and then squander this knowledge by sharing it with other people.

Zaratan boasts features I'd been thinking about but hadn't yet been able to integrate at home: a small art shop, a clever demarcation of space to allow for multiple shows to run at the same time, an unambiguous patronage model, and an efficient internal structure.

By pulling back the layers I got a first-hand look at how a group of ten friends from art school were able to establish something prolific and substantial simply by building slowly and evolving at their own pace. They started with an infrastructure then let the rest grow organically, and not always in a straight line.

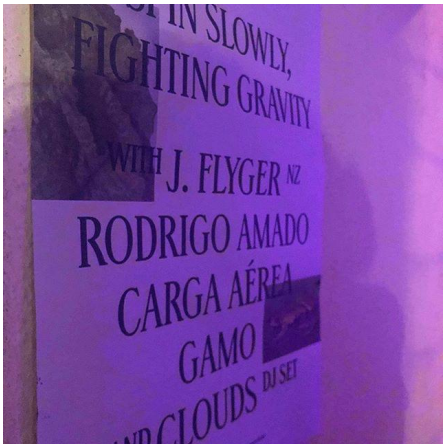
It was like a weight had been lifted. In my head Strange Haven was just this weird, awkward teenager and I felt like I should be forcing it to grow up somehow, and become an adult. But Rome wasn't built in a day and neither was Zaratan, a space I wanted to emulate and learn from. I realised building something from nothing takes time and is a process – one I needed to embrace and slow down, not speed up. This perspective shift was like granting myself permission to breathe. By pulling back the curtain, I discovered a

new approach, one I could apply to both Strange Haven and to my residency at Zaratan.

The second, and perhaps most substantial link came in the form of Joe Keys and Gemma Norris, two of the founding members of Zaratan and my hosts during the seven-week residency.

While an initial shyness overshadowed any sort of lasting first impression I would make, a genuine curiosity endured, and on my ninth night in Lisbon (over some green wine and roasted chestnuts) we slipped silently from collaborators to friends, bonded by similar DIY backgrounds and a shared sarcasm and penchant for cigarettes.

I wanted to know everything I could about Zaratan and about Joe and Gemma, and in turn they seemed intrigued by what Strange Haven was, the arts milieu in Auckland and my own messy past. At nights I would sometimes help out at shows when one of the two were travelling or busy with projects. Working behind the makeshift bar, greeting people, taking money at the door, setting up chairs. Just everyday, familiar tasks. It felt nice to contribute in some way and it was surprisingly comforting.



Spin Slowly Fighting Gravity poster. Photo: Samuel Walsh.



View of Lisbon from a train. Photo: Samuel Walsh.



Zaratan front door. Photo: Samuel Walsh.



Spin Slowly Fighting Gravity show at Zaratan. Photo: Samuel Walsh.



Spin Slowly Fighting Gravity show at Zaratan, 2018. Photo: Samuel Walsh.

One element of my research project was to conduct a series of 'cultural exchanges' between New Zealand-based and international art spaces. I wanted to create a platform in which ARI's from different places could compare cultural ecologies, learn from one another, and potentially collaborate and foster friendships. So I asked Gemma and Joe if I could interview them in a more formal setting, as a sort of test.

As well as being incredibly funny and self-deprecating, they have a wisdom to them and can articulate things in ways I never could (my brain and mouth don't often meet in the middle). A lot resonated with me over the course of our two-hour conversation, especially in terms of topics like labour, criticality, balance and mental health. I was struck by their willingness to talk openly about the struggles that come with running an ARI while also always retaining an endless optimism and enduring self-awareness.

Here are some very short quotations from our very long discussion:

Me: Since opening Strange Haven, a lot of the other projects I was working on fell by the wayside because my resources diminished.

Gemma: *I never thought I would be a curator or a critic. I always thought I would be on the action side and you bring this with you – the ruins of the past. I used to ask myself if I'd get frustrated seeing other people promoted while running a space but suddenly you realise your work enters into a collaboration and it becomes a very interesting part. There isn't always a limit between what is you and what is the other, or what is yours. It's always a kind of negotiation.*

Me: I can get shy and anxious at shows and sometimes struggle with being social while also making sure everything runs smoothly. I like how Joe describes this feeling:
It's very difficult because you don't exist as a person, or as the artist exhibiting, or the musician playing, or the person doing the performance. You're existing permanently in a social way and this is a struggle. You cannot be with yourself because you have to be with the other selves.

I thought a lot about labour when I was in Lisbon and the roles you undertake when you're under-resourced. I asked Gemma what she thought about 'wearing many hats':
It's a bit double-edged. It's amazing because you don't need to be rigid and solely this one person. But at the same time there is a feeling that you're not doing everything at your best because you are a bit divided. For me personally – because it is very personal – it's the only way. I don't ever see myself in one role. I do a lot of things… badly.

Trying to maintain a sense of professionalism while also operating on your own terms is an interesting dichotomy within the ARI sphere. Gemma talks about her conflict around this from a gallery perspective:
My guiltiness comes when there are others involved and you feel you should be there putting your fucking body in front of people and saying "this is good" or "do you have questions?". I also think there is a bit of naïvety in the 'do it yourself' culture because we're not trying to sell anything. The idea is to create a project that is meaningful and we cannot be everywhere at once. I was cleaning the toilet two minutes ago, I can't always be there shining in my high heels. And when you go

to other openings, you see the way that they receive people is different. And you know you are different [*as an ARI*] *but you also don't want to fail your artists or your collaborators. That's my struggle. And it's quite confusing because we are promoting art but we are not good sellers.*

Art is hard. I asked Joe what advice he'd give to someone thinking about setting up an art space (he was not being sarcastic):
Don't do it. If you're an artist, you will stop being an artist because you cannot be an artist and run a space. Economically, it is a black hole. And life-wise you will lose hours of sleep. You have to have a day job because you don't get anything out of the space. BUT we exist and we love it. You have to be really hard-headed to have an art space.

Trying to pinpoint the best aspects about running a space Gemma had this simple, humble response:
I think you realise experiences that weren't so important for you were important for other people. And I feel like we're building a community. Even if it's in a smaller sense. We will not change the world, that's not the point. For me it's clear this project wasn't born to be too big – we never wanted to be assimilated by another institution or to grow to a level where we became "important for the city". But being able to operate sideways and at the same time understand that there are people who were fed by the experience and by collaborating. I think that's the point.

Like a lot of residency programmes, one of the requirements of my stay there was to engage with Zaratan's wider community via an artist talk or discussion panel, which is something Joe and Gemma encouraged me to do early on.

While at first I found this intimidating I realised afterwards that this coaxing was purposeful and twofold. It forced me to articulate my project early on and express why I was in Lisbon, living above a gallery, while also offering an opportunity to meet new people and maybe make some friends. Over the course of that anxiety-inducing afternoon on my second week I discovered another linkage: community.

I met and spent time with five ex-Zaratan residents, each of whom had moved permanently to Lisbon after falling in love with the

space and then the city (Joe and Gemma are sorcerers). I was invited to shows, bars and galleries by local artists and met other like-minded people who made me feel at home while also reminding me of those I missed back at mine. When organising my own show (another residency requirement), I was offered help, advice and a massive list of potential collaborators. Everyone I contacted (many complete strangers) either agreed to take part, showed a genuine enthusiasm, or at the very least replied to my messages and emails (such professionalism).



Samuel Walsh artist talk at Zaratan, 2018. Courtesy Samuel Walsh.



Spin Slowly Fighting Gravity show at Zaratan, 2018. Courtesy of Zaratan.

Although a complete outsider, I felt incredibly welcome in Lisbon. The Portuguese are friendly and far less guarded than I'm used to. They talk confidently about their work and seem equally intrigued by what you're doing and how you do it. At first I found this directness weird and kind of jarring (it's not generally in our make up as New Zealanders to divulge so much about ourselves), but once I got used to it I found it refreshing and it made friendships easier to forge. Who'd have thought by opening up to people you get to know them better (lol).

Another linkage that simmered before spilling over was the parallels at play between Auckland and Lisbon, perhaps more in an existential sense than in a physical or external one.

To establish a sort of daily routine, I would walk around the city, sometimes visiting museums or going to markets, doing touristy junk or simply wandering around, eating ice cream. I'd think about

my project or imagine what it would be like to live in Lisbon as a real resident and not a temporary one.

From the outside looking in, Auckland and Lisbon are worlds apart and I succumbed early on to the romanticism of being in a new city. Developing a crush on a different pace of life. Meeting new people. All the cool things to see, eat and do. But as I began to dig a little deeper I also started to notice similar cracks – especially in terms of everyday life for those living and working in the arts.

Much like Auckland, the cost of living in Lisbon has skyrocketed in the last few years, making it harder for artists and arts practitioners to sustain themselves and their practices. Artist-run spaces are being pushed into outlying suburbs or shutting their doors due to increased rents brought on by rapid gentrification. Similar to New Zealand's art funding body, rigid funding parameters make it more difficult for ARI's in Portugal to access capital. There's a lack of affordable studio space and increased scrutiny from the state and police. Same problems, different place.

Like a lot of people I know, I often struggle with life in New Zealand, which can sometimes feel too quiet and small. Having grown up in China and living a third of my life overseas, I miss the excitement and newness of another place. Being so far away from everything it's easy to cultivate a 'grass is always greener' mentality when it comes to your own backyard, so it's nice to be reminded that there's no such thing as a utopia. Auckland has its imperfections, just like everywhere else, but it's also where my community is, and no community feels more like home or matters as much as your own, nor can it be replicated.

One of the most substantial lessons I learnt from my experience as an artist in residence in Portugal is that progress is not always about moving forwards, or in a single direction. Sometimes it's okay to go sideways or even backwards. And as an ARI, we don't always need to put a stake in the ground and leave it there forever. We're allowed to push it over, cut it in half, dig it up and plant it somewhere else.



Strange Haven studio interior, 2017. Photo: Samuel Walsh.



Everything's Fucked panel discussion, Strange Haven, 2018. Photo: Samuel Walsh.



Poetry reading and performance, Strange Haven, 2018. Photo: Samuel Walsh.



Strange Haven studio interior, 2017. Photo: Samuel Walsh.

Like Zaratan, Strange Haven is not the same space it was when we first started, nor will it be the same six months from now. ARI's reshape – and in many ways that's the true beauty of them. Sometimes they morph into institutions, or migrate from physical spaces to digital ones. Others fluctuate wildly or expire on purpose. I think we should celebrate and encourage these changes rather than stiffen or criticise them.

Since being back in Aotearoa, I've been recycling the same lines when asked 'how it all went'. It's lazy and boring I know, but I still haven't quite figured out a better way to describe things.

Doing a residency is like having a giant arm holding up a giant hand in front of all the stuff that usually eats away at your time and energy. A sort of blockade that says, 'you're not allowed in here right now'. It provides you with space as an adult to decipher, reflect and work on things you care about in a new atmosphere,

which, if you're lucky, inspires, prods and teaches you things about yourself and the spaces you inhabit.

While the social and political muck that weighs heavily upon Auckland and Lisbon may differ in many ways, and our histories are also vast and varied, the monsters that gnaw at the heels of our arts communities share the same rough features, sharp teeth and strong jaws.

In many ways you could find these linkages depressing, but I like to think it's the other way round. Sometimes it's nice to know we're not alone, dancing in the muck. And by learning a little more about how we all operate, we can develop new methods to keep the monsters at bay –and perhaps one day learn how to bite them back.

> *Para bom entendedor, meia palavra basta - To a good 'understander,' half a word is enough.*
>
> - Portuguese Proverb

Biographies



Samuel Walsh is an arts facilitator and producer usually based in Tāmaki Makaurau, Aotearoa. He has organised shows under various monikers across New Zealand, China, Portugal and Australia, and sometimes does writing and music. He runs project space Strange Haven with Katie Kerr and is also one half of Dead Bird Books and Strange Events.

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