

# HOW TO START WITH NOTHING

By PLAND: Practice Liberating Art through Necessary Dislocation

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Imagine that you arrive in a place - arid land of dirt and sagebrush. Everything seems deserted, aside from a scattering of handmade homes such as school buses-turned-shelter, tents, shacks, trailers. The forest lies in the distance, the mountain ranges encircle you, and rainbows promenade across the sky. It is the middle of summer and this place greets you with scorching heat and monsoon rains, with the wide open mesa as a backdrop to the sun, moon, and stars in all their stages, phases, and glories.

With freedom to roam as you see fit, you make your way down narrow dirt roads that provide a clearing through knee-high anthills, sagebrush, beetles, bees, snakes, and tarantulas. You approach a low-slung dome-like structure made of adobe and piled rocks, with worn wood beams poking out at odd angles. You make your way to the front door, careful to duck and avoid hitting your head on the door frame. Upon entering, your eyes adjust to the dusty dark interior and you see a small entryway and sitting area. Shallow steps lead down into a round cave-like room with a dome roof, skylight, and fireplace. The room has been prepared for you, complete with a bed, a writing table, modest cooking and cleaning provisions, a jug full of clean water, and firewood. Outside is a bucket of sawdust that serves as your toilet. This is your first visit to this place and it is where you will live for the next month.

As the month progresses, you experience the desert's extremes. Pitch black skies one night are followed by a moon and stars so bright that closing your eyes doesn't seem to dim the light. You had no idea you'd be afraid of the dark, but the sound of rats scurrying beneath your bed only heightens your anxiety. But you learn to build fires, you indulge in a good book, you trust in your own ability to survive. You learn basket weaving from the man who built your pithouse living quarters. You learn to forage for mushrooms. You indulge in the nearby hot springs. You get sunburnt daily.

Your hosts are three women in their early 30s who work on the land during the day. Just walking distance from your pithouse they hoe the dirt, plotting out an imaginary garden; they hoist sixteen foot posts and twenty-four foot beams, shaping the skeleton of what they call the Main House; they live and sleep just down the road in another handmade homestead. In this place there is no electricity, no generator, no running water, no refrigerator, no internet, and only wafting cell phone reception. The nearest town—and nearest food, ice, or fuel—is 30 miles away. The closest doctor is a forest ranger. Yet your hosts seem blissfully happy to live out here, off the grid, though they must head into town for their day jobs, to buy groceries, and to seek out social life of some sort.

Welcome to PLAND. Founded in 2009, PLAND is a new and ever-changing off-the-grid residency program. It is a place shaped by necessity and by the people who come to live and learn in an environment of few luxuries, limited resources, and collaborative survival. It is a sensibility, a group of people, and a commitment to Practice Liberating Art through Necessary Dislocation.

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During our first season, we housed inaugural resident Sophie Mellor at PLAND. Her experience was much like that described above. From Bristol, UK, it was her first time visiting the United States and we were nervous about introducing her to New Mexico with such limited and rugged means, but we agreed that the uniqueness of the context and the natural beauty it afforded somehow outweighed the nonexistent shower and compensated for the presence of rats. Besides, she mentioned in her application that she'd once lived in a cave.

Frankly, prior to Sophie's arrival, we had several kinks yet to iron out in our residency program plan. Where would she sleep? How and what could we provide for her? What would she do while she was here? Would she be bored? Would we all get along? Since we identify PLAND as a residency program, we often wrestle with certain expectations about what it means to host a resident. We had to come to terms with the fact that we were making up our own rules as we went along.

When Sophie arrived, we had barely begun construction on our main house. She ended up staying in a pithouse dome that was built in the 70s by a local homesteader who donated the structure to PLAND so that we could house our resident even when we couldn't yet house ourselves. Our other inaugural artists-in-residence, The Topographia Collective, camped in tents on site in a series of visits for one and two nights at a time, and helped us to erect the first posts of our main house. The University of New Mexico Land Arts of the American West program set up camp in and around the construction site that is PLAND. We greeted them with a dirty handshake and instructions for using the composting toilet. We shared water and encouraged the use of sunscreen. We pointed out flowering cacti and told stories about the neighborhood. We made the very conscious decision to invite residents and school groups to PLAND during the construction phase of our main headquarters. We believed that the process of starting an organization and a residency program was mirrored by the process of physical construction. We wanted to make the act of becoming transparent. We wanted to bring people together in the conscious act of *becoming together*. For us, this required an intentional and delicate balance of confidence and humility.

By anxiously throwing ourselves (and every element of our lives) into starting a residency program in the middle of nowhere, we learned some valuable "how to's." First and foremost, we learned that the PLAND experience is ultimately about sharing a place. It has everything to do with our specific location in a failed suburban grid near the tiny, nearly abandoned town of Tres Piedras, New Mexico. It is informed by our neighbors, the weather, the phases of the moon, the state of the dirt road, the time it takes to drive to town. It is not a place that most tourists or students or artists would find themselves. It is weird and wild and without trees or in plain site of the highway, it is also quite vulnerable. But we love PLAND. We love all of the eccentricities of the place. To share our infectious curiosity about our locale is the most generous gift we could give our guests.

For PLAND, residency and hosting go hand in hand. We invite people to share the experience of how and where we live. Through this bold experiment in sharing our experience, we discovered

something essential about hospitality. We found that we did not need to provide our guests with soft beds or gourmet meals or fancy art studios or even a roof. Certainly, these luxuries would have been lovely to share but through the unorthodox practice of welcoming people into a situation that could be potentially uncomfortable or new or unknown, we discovered that what makes our guests comfortable is a shared faith that everything is going to be okay, that the dark cover of night will give way to a new day, that bathing from a basin might actually be fun. Hosting, for us, is not about sharing luxuries or even a good time, but about the opportunity to consider where and why and how.

### **How to start a residency program with nothing:**

- Allow yourself to be romanced and see that the relationship that comes from this romance is powerful.
- See the immense possibility where nothing exists.
- Do not worry about context. You can create meaning anywhere, with anybody.
- Have no fear of completely changing your life: location, job, economic status, relationships.
- Really live. Just as a person can not be loved who does not already love themselves, one can not start a residency program without deeply residing somewhere.
- Money does not mean much. It comes in handy, but it really has little meaning.
- Do not ignore a bolt from the blue. If you are suddenly wildly inspired (like we were to drop everything and buy a tiny piece of land for \$1200), it is probably something rare and worth jumping on.
- Collaborate. We always say "Team work makes the dream work."
- Do not try to do everything alone. This is different than collaborating.
- Do things with individuation. Everyone has a special gift, a favorite task, a wonderful quirk.
- Do not apologize for your process. Things happen slowly, in odd ways, in strange places, with bizarre outcomes, and no one will fully understand it. Not even you.
- Celebrate what you love. If you love walking, invite people to walk with you.
- Eat together.
- Accept fear. Some people are really scared of rats, others are not. Some people are afraid of driving down really long dirt roads, others are not. Embracing experience means the good and the bad.
- Recognize what feels wildly wonderful, maybe even crazy. Then share those moments. It is what makes you, and your context unique.
- Be friendly. You never know who will be your next guru, benefactor, or neighbor.
- Do not wait for everything to be perfect. There never will be enough money, the right time, or all the know-how. Desperation breeds innovation.
- Do things you do not know how to do. It is amazing what you can figure out.
- Give everyone space. If you over facilitate, your guest is having YOUR experience, not theirs.
- Consider what is TRULY essential. Food. Water. Sleep. Embrace that how the essentials are administered is up for creative intervention.
- Set some guidelines. People need boundaries, such as "Do not walk barefoot in the desert", or "Don't just poop anywhere". It makes the experience better for everyone.
- Allow your guest's curiosity to be your guide. You will learn more about them, yourself, and your environment.
- Laugh.