

[Up in the AIR: How will tech residencies reshape Bay Area art?](#)

[Ceci Moss](#) | Tue Jan 20th, 2015 11:30 a.m.



Image from Art+Tech: Virtual Reality, November 2014. (Photo: Codame).

Over the past year, San Francisco and the Bay Area have come to be defined in the national sphere by the [think piece](#). In the constant stream of articles about [gentrification](#), the [Ellis Act evictions](#), artist displacement, and [arts non profits closing left and right](#) in response to the city's rising population and booming tech industry, it might be surprising to note that a number of tech companies are investing increasingly in artist residency programs. In fact, two of the biggest tech companies in the region—Facebook and Autodesk—maintain active residency programs. For companies without the infrastructure for such endeavors, local art and technology non-profit CODAME offers to pair tech companies with artists for individual projects through their "Adopt An Artist" program. While there is a lot of conversation (and concern) in the Bay Area regarding [the tech industry's lack of support and philanthropy for the arts](#), the questions seem skewed towards trying to figure out how to cater to tech wealth, rather than thinking through art's role in the tech industry itself. This text surveys corporate residency programs in the Bay Area which exemplify how artists engage with this industry, and begins to sketch out possible implications—or potential—for the art infrastructure and its relationship with tech creativity.

[Autodesk's Pier 9 Artist-in-Residence program](#) is housed in the corporation's immense facility in Pier 9 along the waterfront in downtown San Francisco. Artists apply for four-month residencies at the space, which provides access to their workshop, a stipend, and the ability to work directly with the company's engineers on their projects. The program maintains a diverse pool of applicants who range from fashion designers to chefs, architects, and technologists as well as fine artists, who have access to Autodesk's high-end equipment, materials, and software, plus training and skillshare programs. Although it is not an explicit part of the program, the focus on "makers" over "fine artists" benefits Autodesk as well. The company launched Autodesk 123D in 2009 as free 3D modeling software designed for the general consumer, and they acquired the DIY info sharing website Instructables in 2011. The AIR program began at Instructables before their purchase by Autodesk, who developed it into a much larger initiative. All AIR residents are required to post their projects to the website, so there is a direct tie into the site's content. Envisioning how people create with their tools, or their competitor's tools, in a variety of scenarios is clearly a valuable asset to the company, especially as the mainstream culture moves [into a maker culture](#).



Autodesk Pier 9 Workshop.

Autodesk's Pier 9 AIR Program Manager Vanessa Sigurdson describes the environment at Autodesk as an "office full of artists, not an office with artists" and they aim to have active interchange between the resident artists and engineers. Former resident artists [Joseph DeLappe](#) and [Adrien Segal](#) felt that the environment was very supportive and encouraging for visiting artists, with an "anything goes" atmosphere. DeLappe created rubber stamps for [In Drones We Trust](#), while [Segal used water consumption statistics to build a canyon-like bench](#). Both mentioned that the workshop helped to foster the company's culture of bustling, creative energy. Sigurdson referenced the Xerox PARC artist-in-residence (PAIR) program as an important inspiration for the residency, a project that similarly brought artists and technologists together in collaboration.

Like Autodesk's Pier 9 AIR Program, Facebook's artist-in-residence program is a recent and growing initiative. Originally launched by Drew Bennett for their Menlo Park campus almost three years ago, their AIR program grew out of the Analog Research Lab, a printmaking studio within Facebook's Communication Design department founded by communication designers Ben Barry and Everett Katigbak. The posters created in the Analog Research Lab by Facebook employees, the Communication Design department, and AIR residents can be found strewn all over the walls of Facebook's immense campus. Some posters are art projects initiated by residents or staff communication designers, others promote events (like Gay Pride) or display slogans. The posters yield a colorful, collegiate, cafe vibe to Facebook's many corridors.



Jeff Canham installation at Facebook. (Photo: Drew Bennett).

Alongside the posters, one of the primary outcomes from the Facebook AIR are site-specific installations, which pop up throughout the facility. Adrien Segal was a resident at Facebook directly after her time at Autodesk, and she noted that the Facebook program was much smaller in scope, with only two artists in the residency at any given time. Like Autodesk, artists are given free reign on their projects, and can decide the locations and space for their work. Bennett and his team then help the artist with fabrication and production, much of which does occur onsite at the Analog Research Lab's shop. The projects range widely, from floral graffiti murals by [Jet Martinez](#) to delicate hanging paper sculptures by [Val Britton](#). Residents are required to do a social event for Facebook employees related to their project, whether it be an artist's talk, workshop, or skillshare.

Given that the residency program grew out of the Communication Design department and the Analog Research Lab, it's no surprise that much of the work by Facebook resident artists is graphic in nature, for example in the cases of [Jeff Canham](#), [Tucker Nichols](#), and [Jane Kim](#). There's also a heavy regional focus, with a vast number of artists coming from the Bay Area. When asked what he seeks in the artists he selects for the residency, Bennett said he brought in artists that "help to reinforce our [values](#)...whose work is in dialogue with the high level ideas of the company...The message, the story being told through this art is all about the utility of art as a creative force and an inspirational force. It doesn't need to be framed or pedestaled, it's uninhibited inspiration and curiosity- which can run up a stairwell or around a lightwell or spill out onto the floor—it could happen anywhere."



Jane Kim Installation at Facebook. (Photo Credits: Kelly Hsiao + Richard Morgenstein).

The five year old non-profit arts organization CODAME is better known for their art and technology events in San Francisco, which in the past have featured live music, presentations, interactive installations, and hack-a-thons. More recently, they launched an "[Adopt an Artist](#)" program that pairs artists with tech companies, who support specific projects, residencies, performances and talks. CODAME functions as an intermediary, helping to solicit companies in support of artists [within their roster](#). Rackspace, Organic, Shopify, Geekdom and Box are a few of the companies who have participated in the "Adopt an Artist" program. The collaborative coworking space Geekdom is currently hosting the artist [ANI](#) in residence, who is building out her iPad instrument [sBASSdrum](#) and developing an iOS app for CODAME. When I spoke with ANI, she said she was initially drawn to the "organic atmosphere" and "inspirational, experiential art" found at CODAME's events.

I attended CODAME's "Art + Tech: Virtual Reality" at Mozilla and it felt like a networking event for creative technologists—part trade show, part rave. The presentations by Eddie Lee on his game [Collider](#) (which he described as "DMT for Oculus Rift") and John Carpenter, a UX designer at Mozilla building an Oculus Rift-enabled web browser called [mozVR](#), were a reminder of the truly wild things being developed in the Bay Area. CODAME [professes](#) to "embrace innovation through creativity, play, and collaboration between artists and technologists"—a statement that resonated with the motivation behind the other two residencies, who also cite innovation, creativity, and play as primary drivers. The Xerox Parc PAIR program came up in many of my conversations as a cultural touchstone indicative of the values and goals of these residency programs. Resonant with the unfettered utopianism of [the Californian Ideology](#), Xerox Parc brought artists, scientists and technologists together in order to ferment [a cross-disciplinary "knowledge ecology" and create "new ways of looking at the world."](#)

Reflecting on this new generation of artist-in-residence programs at technology corporations, I wonder, what happens when art becomes just a vehicle for innovation? Is there room in these artist-in-residence programs for artists to act as critical voices?

To think about the impetus behind these corporate artist-in-residence programs, it's worthwhile to compare them with corporate private art collections. For better or for worse, the finance industry is a major pillar of support for the art system, and it has helped shape it. As an example, UBS, Deutsche Bank, JP Morgan Chase, and Bank of America all possess major art collections. In the most basic terms possible, the bottom line for finance is investment, assets which accrue value over time. For the tech industry, the bottom line is in solutions--tools and services for people to use. This requires investing in design, which demands process. If the art object on display in the corporate lobby is a symbol of accumulated wealth and financial stability, the artist-in-residence studio or workshop in the tech company becomes a showroom of ingenuity and creativity. (Think of the silkscreened and letterpressed posters across Facebook's campus, or the steady stream of tours through Autodesk's workshop to their clients, colleagues, etc.) The process, not the object, is placed on view.



Analog research lab at Facebook. (Photo: Drew Bennett.)

Over the past year, anxieties have been expressed about design and popular culture's appropriation of contemporary art. I think of [Hal Foster's worrisome declaration about the establishment of "total design"](#) collapsing the aesthetic and utilitarian realms as much as Ed Halter and Lauren Cornell's [Mass Effect](#) conversation about popular culture's

absorption of contemporary art. If tech is the Bay Area's main industry and export, with its emphasis on making, creating, and, above all, innovative design, then how can (or should) that translate into the art infrastructure here, and elsewhere? As Mat Dryhurst and Brian Rogers put it in their [Re-Engineering interviews](#) for Art Practical, the Bay Area has a rich, radical history in both art and technology, offering "[a perfect place to stage a new paradigm of collaboration and antagonism between arts and tech](#)." I fully agree. It seems there's a real opportunity to nurture art that can work in and against technology, in and against design, beginning with the imperfect corporate residency frameworks described. There should be more models, platforms and mutations for this kind of work.

Updated January 20, 11PM. An earlier version of this article mislabeled Facebook's Communication Design department as Graphic Design. The founders of Facebook's Analog Research Lab (Ben Barry and Everett Katigbak) have also been added.

Tags: [art and tech](#) [Bay Area](#) [CODAME](#) [hacker](#) [maker](#) [culture](#) [San Francisco](#) [virtual reality](#)

