

SSW's Caregivers Residencies  
by Claire Sawers

*"It's too bad that taking care of each other has to be so radical."*

Loree Erickson, Toronto-based disability justice activist and researcher of care collectives

My residency at Scottish Sculpture Workshop in May last year took on a meta role as I was a caregiver invited to do a residency, writing about caregivers doing residencies. Before, during and after my stay I had a lot of illuminating and connecting chats with caregivers and arts workers about access and inclusivity. We all wanted to go beyond those funding-bingo buzzwords and explore what it actually means to create communities that look out for each other, long term. We discussed how arts organisations can become more welcoming to those with caregiving responsibilities and disabilities. It's not all about funding either, some solutions were free and surprisingly simple – but we need to consider how these approaches can be supported on a structural and societal level. The collective hope was that we can reimagine a future where this isn't 'radical' care, but just part of everyday life.

My first visit to SSW in 2018 left a strong impression on me. I got a last minute invite from Alasdair Campbell, co-curator of Counterflows, who thought I might like to see what was happening on one of the SSW x Counterflows residencies. He wasn't wrong. Edinburgh-born, Vilnius-based artist and instrument maker Sholto Dobie performed an amazing outdoor set of homemade animal calls in a quarry. During his stay at SSW, he had built hand-held droning instruments out of cheap, battery-operated airbed mattress pumps and musical reeds. He took inspiration from duck bills and Siberian traditional 'yoik' songs which imitate animals and insects. Minds blown, the audience of twenty or so stomped back past fields of sheep and Highland cattle to SSW for bowls of soup and a screening of an incredible documentary that Sholto co-created about Ukrainian folk songs. Sitting chatting around a big long table of homemade food, surrounded by shelves stacked with books on sculpture, dance, experimental music, climate action, gender studies and trees, and watching as a bonfire was built outside, I remember feeling utterly bummed that I had to leave sharpish for the five-ish-hour train journey back down to Edinburgh, and miss the sauna that was being fired up in the courtyard. There was talk of whisky too. "Come back and see us soon!", shouted Sam Trotman, director of SSW. A glorious powerhouse of a human, Sam had spent the day enthusiastically dodging between artists and visitors, often with her three-year-old daughter balanced on her hip.

What was this remote and magical place where artists were given space to explore ideas and unstructured time for creating? Where locals in the village of Lumsden (population around 400) were also invited to enlightening artist talks and practical bike fixing workshops, where sculptors, ceramicists, silversmiths and wood carvers could work in the studios and workshops, where staff baked rhubarb pies for sharing and chopped wood for saunas?

An artist space and community hub surrounded by rolling hills and stone circles in rural Aberdeenshire, SSW dates back to 1979. Sculptor Fred Bushe began renting the premises of a former bakery and built in simple accommodation for artists. The remit has evolved and

expanded over the years, so SSW is now an international arts organisation, giving a place for artists to train, focus on a project, find inspiration, meet other creative people and learn from peers and experts alike. The SSW website describes their vision to 'expand the possibilities of what sculpture can be – continuously working towards positive social and environmental change'. Summing all that up in one beautiful nutshell, it says SSW is simply 'a site of possibility'.

### Some background to the Caregivers residencies

SSW had been working since 2018 in collaboration with Counterflows, the Glasgow-based, diverse, annual festival of experimental and international music. Counterflows artists and musicians spent time at SSW as part of what they called "joyful inter/anti disciplinary residencies". They have been a huge success and led to many conversations around what residencies should – and could – involve. However, it was predominantly young, single artists who applied for artistic residencies, noticed SSW director Sam Trotman. Why was that? What were some of the barriers for those with caregiving responsibilities, for example? What could arts organisations be doing to make their residencies more accessible? Back in 2021, over and above their artist residencies, SSW piloted a new residency aimed at caregivers.

The idea of a residency for caregivers had been brewing for some time, partly inspired by the incredibly positive and welcoming experience that Sam had when she first visited SSW with her three-month-old daughter, thanks to her now co-director colleague Sara Gallie. Sam was working at the time in East London as an education producer for Artsadmin before upping sticks with her partner Alexis and taking the post of SSW director in 2016.

Arriving with a newborn baby, Sam was impressed with how supportive members of the SSW team were, making sure she had everything she needed onsite – informed by their own experiences of multiple forms of caregiving. The day to day running of the workshops and community programme kept Sam and the team busy, with little time to devise new ways of welcoming caregivers, but the 2020 lockdown presented an opportunity for planning and making changes. Sam has always been inspired by collective ways of living and working; from the Wild feminist communes of the 1970s through to the pioneering model that Mother House Studios created in London, where artists are supported through pregnancy and motherhood. Describing itself as 'the first and only artists' studio model with integrated childcare', the artists' open working space is connected to a space for children, and everyone can move freely between both areas. Childcare facilitators are there, sharing childcare responsibilities with the artist-parents in the communal space.

Following SSW's first successful year of the caregivers residency, Creative Scotland launched a targeted fund called Radical Care, their action research project for arts organisations who want to try out new approaches to support those with caring responsibilities. It seemed a perfect fit to further this work into the next few years. Together with Counterflows, SSW received Radical Care funding from Creative Scotland alongside five other organisations; Moniack Mhor, Hospitalfield, Barrowland Ballet, the Work Room and Puppet Animation Scotland.

This funding allowed for the continuation of SSW x Counterflows Caregivers residency programme, as well as training for SSW staff on how to better support disabled artists. The residency programme is now in its fourth year, with caregivers on residency over the next few months at SSW.

### What the residencies have involved

As for the brass tacks of the residency, residents are given one month with accommodation at SSW, £1500 as an artist's fee, plus a £300 travel budget, a £300 materials budget and £1000 to support access and care costs. But much more than this, crucially, the artists are treated with flexibility, understanding, respect and support. All of the artists I spoke to agreed that being a caregiver, as well as being ill or disabled, comes with a lot of emotional labour and paperwork. The labour of being ill can, in itself, be exhausting and demoralising.

Sound artist and photographer **Chris Dooks** is a part-time carer. He and his wife Eleanor care for their son (10) and daughter (9), who uses a wheelchair.

Chris took part in SSW's first ever SSW x Counterflows Caregivers' residency in April 2021, during the lockdown. He used his month there to explore the role of the artist as healer, and make sound objects including an aquaphone (an underwater instrument). He got support from an SSW technician who taught him spot welding. He also took field recordings in the local forests and drew inspiration from nearby stone circles.

"Artists often have to give up making their art because of their care responsibilities, or scaling it back to the point of effectively stopping," explains Chris. "It took a lot of cooperation from my wife for me to be away for that amount of time but we made it work. I also have ME and have been ill for 20 years. I'm someone who stays up late and falls asleep at 3am. The solitude during lockdown meant of course I had no communal meals with other artists, but I got the space I needed for working and sleeping."

Chris used some of his access funding to pay for taxis and activities for his children while he was away on residency, but was grateful that SSW didn't request for the costs to be painstakingly invoiced for.

"What was great, straight away, was the lack of form filling. It can feel embarrassing to invoice for everything, and you wonder sometimes, whose business is it?"

Chris often struggles to do work at home and found the experience of a creative residency so valuable, he has since bought a campervan to try and recreate the conditions of solitude and escape. He, like other caregivers residents continue on as they work with SSW and Counterflows to select the following year's residents.

“At first I didn’t even realise that people could apply who weren’t sculptors. It’s a great way to include hidden carers, disabled people, unpaid carers – there are so many people that the system overlooks. This residency made me feel heard. It was an amazing opportunity.”

A second residency took place in June 2021 when the performance artist and choreographer **Laura Bradshaw** visited SSW with her partner Murray and children, (4 and 10 months).

“(Currently) three of us are male and one of us is female,” wrote Laura during her residency. “One of us is disabled and three of us are non-disabled, two of us are caregivers and two of us are the recipients. We are all at different stages of learning about care. The residency is an opportunity for us to begin a process of researching our interdependent relationships.”

Laura’s research during her visit focused on physical movement and the frequent changing of roles within a family. It wasn’t possible for the family to take a one-month stretch together, however SSW encourages residents to break up the time if need be around other commitments. Laura chose to split the residency into two fortnights and completed the residency in August.

A third residency took place in August and September 2021 when the interdisciplinary artist **Hang Linton** stayed at SSW for one month with his partner Laura, their child and his mother. On top of being a parent, Laura has chronic disabilities, so Hang has had to turn down work in the past because of his care responsibilities.

“Caregivers are forgotten about and opportunities are rarely flexible to the notions of care and disability,” says Hang. “Things are changing for sure but a lot of work still needs to be done. SSW’s caregivers residency was the first of its kind I had ever seen. This is definitely pioneering and I believe a lot of art organisations, venues and festivals should take notes. There are a lot of places taking the steps to be more accessible and conversations are happening. I hope that within the next two years there are serious jumps and we start to see innovative approaches being adopted across the board in both art and music industries.”

**Oren Shoemith and Rabindranath X Bhose**, two performance artists and writers, applied to share the residency as partners. Coming from queer crip and disabled communities, they describe their relationship as ‘a reciprocal caring relationship’ so they asked SSW if they could share the resources and visit together. SSW was happy to accommodate and also made arrangements for them to bring their cat when they visited in February and March 2023.

“SSW thoughtfully facilitated us bringing along our cat Luna, prioritising inter-species care relations just as much as they would human ones,” they wrote in a blog post about their visit. “The caregivers residency for us may have equally been renamed ‘crip residency’ or ‘queer family residency’.”

“I can have sudden changes in health,” explains Oren when I visit SSW for a raku firing evening, during a snowy spell in March 2023. “My response to that health precarity is to live in a profoundly anti-capitalist way. The work of resting, the work of being sick, the work of caring is

hugely important to us both. As far as I know, this residency from SSW is a unique opportunity. There is a real scarcity of this kind of thing. Organisations often have a fear of setting precedents, changing how they operate somehow. But SSW is focused instead on the legacies that they are building. That's quite wonderful. Access should be baked in, not an exception."

Rabi, Oren and I have made cups of tea in SSW's bothy – a communal kitchen with a long wooden dining table, beside a window overlooking rolling fields, dotted with sheep, well camouflaged at the moment because of the snow. We are drinking our tea on sofas just outside the main workshop while my son, then 1, naps in his pram. They've just gone through the time-consuming, not to mention draining and degrading process of a PIP tribunal, to appeal a disability benefits decision. Thankfully the appeal was successful, but they feel extremely grateful that the process happened to take place during their residency, making it far less stressful than it would otherwise have been.

We're joined by artist **Norma Hunter** who is also on residency, using the SSW studio two days a week. She drops in with her husband Tony, who has finished a chemo session earlier that day and is napping in a room next to us.

"It can be hard to identify as an artist anymore," says Norma, who had been coming to SSW for decades as a visiting artist before applying for a caregivers residency. Her work often involves social engagement and facilitating community workshops. "The carer role can erode your identity. The stress, the lack of sleep, the suffering, all the appointments . . . if something's got to go, it'll be your art."

Oren, Rabi and Norma are simultaneously working on completely different projects in different media – referencing tarot cards, snowdrops, chrysalises, labyrinths, pilgrimages, Celtic mythology and divination among other things – overlapping their working days occasionally in the workshop or bothy. They all agree that the lack of pressure from SSW has been hugely valuable.

"I feel gently supported," says Norma. "There wasn't a precise brief and no outcomes are needed, which leaves me the space to explore and experiment. That's phenomenal. It's helped me feel like an artist again. Being a carer has helped me learn to be more forgiving of myself and to accept help."

### My residency

On the first night of my own week-long residency in May 2023, we sit in Sam and Alexis's garden while their kids play with my son on a giant trampoline. Sam stops to blow up a giant balloon for her daughter while breastfeeding her son, flipping between discussing SSW business with me and dinner plans with her partner. I'm poured a glass of red wine as they rapidly produce some sensational home-made spanakopita and plonk the youngest two kids into a playpen while we eat. A working mother who instinctively takes on a mothering role to the visiting artists, Sam and her family live close to SSW, meaning the lines between her

professional and personal life are constantly blurring. Later that night, despite my protests, she insists on dashing over to my onsite accommodation at bedtime with a replacement blackout curtain as she is worried that the light will keep my baby awake.

Over dinner, Sam is thinking back to the caregiver-artists who have stayed at SSW so far. “Everyone is very mindful of each others’ needs. Practical, emotional, creative – often that can mean entirely different things for each artist-caregiver. Who needs quiet for a phone call, who needs a lift into town, who needs a big space for drying out work materials. We want to facilitate working artists so as well as providing access to the workshop, we want to create spaces to eat together, have a sauna together, chat about utopias on a walk in the woods, that is all part of it.”

I experienced all of the above, in abundance. Sam’s mum (who is temporarily living close by) arrived early on my second day with a bag full of plastic dinosaurs, allowing my son to play with Sam’s son while I replied to some emails. When my son napped for an hour at lunchtimes, I would attempt some writing or phone calls. I’d arranged for a phone chat with Chris Dooks which happened to fall before my son’s naptime, so I took the call in Lumsden’s playpark, at one point following my energetic toddler seven times up a rope ladder, with my phone clamped between my ear and shoulder. (I drew the line at flying down a long metal tunnel-slide during the call, which seemed to disappoint my son.)

While I’m visiting, Finnish artist Santtu Laine is on residency at SSW with his wife Sanni and their young daughter (3). We discuss working parent hacks as well as sustainable seaweed bioplastics (Santtu’s project) while sweating it out in the sauna in the evening, as Sam keeps an eye on my son indoors. Another night after I’ve had a pottery lesson from sculptor and ceramicist Ramkumar Kannadasan – who is also on residency, and our neighbour for the week on the top floor of SSW – Sam’s daughter blends four family bags of crisps in a big bowl for a snack mega mix as the grown ups share prosecco and pasta. We talk bat sightings, mushroom varieties, Japanese vending machines, lapidary and hangover hacks before everyone disperses to their rooms upstairs, or across the village green to home.

On a morning thick with mizzle, I stride out through Clova Estate while pushing the pram, headphones on, listening to Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha reading the audiobook version of her wonderful *Care Work*. Part instruction manual, part call to arms on disability justice and the need for care webs, her book emphasises the need for solidarity, not charity. She imagines a future where access needs are no longer considered shameful, and mutual aid networks mean sick and disabled people needn’t depend on the state or biological family. She also notes, with what sounds like an enormous eyeroll, that it took Covid to raise awareness in able bodied people of some of the limitations, fears and barriers that disabled folks experience everyday.

After a picnic lunch spread out on damp blaeberry bushes and springy sphagnum moss, I push the pram back in the direction of SSW; my son keen to explore stones with Sam’s partner Alexis, a talented professional dry stone waller, and me ready to face the emails waiting on my laptop. Medical staff, lawyers and social workers have crept into my inbox more and more over the past few years, and while I am happy with my caregiver role, the portion of my brain devoted

to creative thoughts has been downsized. I became a solo mother by choice in 2021, and love exploring notions of community or “villages” when thinking about ways to care for kids, as well as adults. I became a carer to my disabled sister in 2020, and share part-time care responsibilities for her children, aged 5 and 10. A few months after my SSW residency, my mum is diagnosed with a serious illness and my journalism shrinks back a little more to make space for my caregiver role.

Red admiral butterflies float past me and swallows dip overhead as I dunk a peppermint tea bag into a mug at the back of the bothy, laptop on my knee, rocking my son’s pram with my foot. I’ve got in the habit of using the Merlin bird ID app on my phone and have recorded cuckoos, goldfinches, willow warblers, jackdaws, linnets and blackbirds during my week in Lumsden. Something about the constant proximity to forest trails and farmland – not to mention sympathetic ears and resilient, imaginative creative types – has made certain care responsibilities feel less daunting over the past few days. Less frustrating, less strength sapping and not just more manageable, but often straight up joyful. SSW doesn’t just want to simply bring together artists and caregivers, they want to do it in a way that is fun, revolutionary and radically tender. Full of possibility, instead of more barriers. Solutions met with emotional intelligence as well as practical know how. SSW knows rule number one about accessibility; if able bodied people aren’t sure how to be more accessible, just ask disabled people. Then listen to what they suggest. The effects ripple through the building and into the village, out into the wider world as artists return home, less depleted, more connected, richer because of the sense of reciprocity and expansiveness embedded in the SSW community.

Click to read blogs about the residencies written by [Chris Dooks](#), [Laura Bradshaw](#), [Oren Shoesmith and Rabindranath X Bhose](#) and [Norma Hunter](#).