

Practices | Aug 2018

## Dialogues Interviews Anastasia Patsey, Director of the St. Petersburg Art Residency (SPAR) at Pushkinskaya-10



Image courtesy of St. Petersburg Art Residency (SPAR)

### Overview

Dialogues interviews **Anastasia Patsey**, Director of the **St. Petersburg Art Residency (SPAR)** at Pushkinskaya-10. In this interview we trace back to the fascinating origins of St. Petersburg's Pushkinskaya-10 art center and underline the unique role SPAR plays within the local art community and beyond.

## **Pushkinskaya-10 has a long story which goes back to the Eighties. Why did you feel the need to create a new residency program for international artists only six years ago?**

To answer your question, I will have to talk a little bit about the institution itself since it is a very unusual one. Back in the Soviet Union, culture, like in all the totalitarian states, was strictly divided into official and unofficial culture. Official art was an instrument of ideology and was completely controlled and supported by the government, whereas unofficial artists were extremely limited in their opportunities and had to stay in the underground for a long time.

The roots of Pushkinskaya-10 lie in the nonconformist art movement from the Sixties and Seventies. When the political situation gradually changed towards the so called melt-down period the nonconformist artists were finally allowed to show their works publicly and started forming a community to represent themselves. In 1989, the artists found an empty building here in the Pushkinskaya street, that they occupied. Of course, they had to find a compromise with the city authorities and the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991 was a turning point. At this moment many things changed and many things became possible, so they could negotiate about founding an art institution with the new authorities. In a sense it was a win-win situation – the artists got the space and the authorities made a generous gesture for their branding.

In order to develop their initiative, the artists had to abandon the anarchy-based lifestyle and institutionalize. They founded an art centre and called it Pushkinskaya-10 based on the address. After large renovations in the Nineties, the space changed and so did its structure. Today the art centre is home to over 40 studios of artists from the original nonconformist movement who both live and work here, as well as an art collection, independent galleries, the residency program, an archive, two concert stages, a bar and a café. Besides the St. Petersburg Art Residency I also direct our largest department — the Museum of Nonconformist Art, which holds an incredible collection of independent artworks from the Soviet Union from the Fifties until today.

I started working at Pushkinskaya-10 back in 2009 and it was a time when the institution has been in a crisis for several years. Two of the most important problems were: the inaccessibility of the art studios for artists from outside of the existing community and a dramatic lack of international contacts in comparison to the early years of Pushkinskaya-10 when it received a lot of international attention and support.

When in 2012 one of the initiatives based at the art centre shut down and moved out from their office I “occupied” this space for the future residency. First there were only two small studios, but as the program developed throughout the next years we expanded to five.

## **How much do the origins of the Pushkinskaya-10 art center influence the residency’s current mission?**

The cultural context of the art center is just a framework for SPAR. The applicants don’t have to demonstrate a connection to or a strong interest in Soviet nonconformism, as the residency program has a much broader focus. However, many of our participants, especially curators and researchers work with the permanent residents of the art centre and our museums’ collection and archive.

I always say that the house itself has a strong character with its rich history and a family-like community of artists, so it's almost impossible not to be influenced by this atmosphere. The artists live and work in the middle of a vibrant and sometimes crowded art centre. But most of the them see it as an advantage rather than a disadvantage.

We try to keep the residency program and the artists-in-residency fully integrated into the art center and its activities, but at the same time provide them with enough freedom and independency to explore and work beyond this context.

### **The residency program has a strategically defined role within the context of the art center. What role can the program have at the scale of the city?**

In the context of the city SPAR is an important platform for networking and exchange between local and international art professionals. There is a flow of international artists coming to St. Petersburg for some projects and events, sometimes just as tourists. But of course if you are in the city for a longer period and already connected to the art community like the one at Pushkinskaya-10 the quality of the contacts that you can create is much higher.

We regularly invite our artists-in-residence to different art events such as exhibition openings, receptions, studio visits, lectures and screenings and introduce them to different people and institutions. As Hans-Ulrich Obrist said in one of his interviews, curating is a lot about creating contact zones and connecting the right people and organizations.

The residency holds a lot of events in the art centre: exhibitions, artist talks, performances, informal brunches, where our artist-in-residence are also active as hosts. It's great to see how some of the contacts develop into long-lasting connections and future collaborations.

### **This reminds me of the research I conducted among international residency programs in 2015. When considering the value these organizations bring to artists in terms of social network, you can see two directions: residency programs function as open doors for artists to access the local art scenes, meanwhile they accrue valuable international contacts by doing this sort of residency-hopping all around the world.**

An interesting thing to look at is the criteria that we use to track and analyze the development of the program. We work with numbers and ask the artists to fill out evaluation forms. They are good for strategic planning, but not for the emotional understanding of how the program has been developing.

Recently I received a message from one of our former artists-in-residence who was in a residency in Iceland where she met another artist who was in our program the same year. In St. Petersburg they only missed each other for two weeks, but a couple of months later they meet in this remote residency in another part of the world. And when such connections happen, I really get to see how the SPAR community grows.

It's also important for us not only to accompany the artist during their time in St. Petersburg, but to follow their work after the residency. Today, with a list of over 100 participants it's getting harder, but we try to stay in touch with most of our former residents.

## **Let's go back to the local art community. What are the dynamics occurring in the St. Petersburg art scene and how do you interact with them?**

The art scene here is actually not that big in comparison to other international megapoles and the main actors know each other personally. So when some of our artists want to get in touch with someone, whether an individual or an institution, it is relatively easy to find a personal connection. In St. Petersburg, there are very few institutions professionally dealing with contemporary art besides the Contemporary Art Department of the State Hermitage Museum, the Russian Museum and the National Center of Contemporary Art. The institutions and individual actors collaborate a lot and there seems to be a feeling of solidarity rather than concurrence — there's almost no state support for contemporary art, so there's not much to compete for. Also the division between commercial or independent art is not that visible because the art market is underdeveloped.

A major problem is that there is no state policy on contemporary art, no clear statement by the government. Which motivates us, small NGOs, to partner with each other in a situation where the state almost abandoned its responsibilities of supporting contemporary art and they fell on the shoulders of independent cultural institutions and private initiatives.

As for the Pushkinskaya-10, it is very important for us to preserve and sustain nonconformist underground culture from the Nineties, but at the same time to open up for the newest forms of international contemporary art.

## **Who are the artists in residence at Pushkinskaya-10?**

Most of our artists come from abroad, mainly from Europe, USA and Australia. We had very few Russian artists participating in the program and next year we are planning to launch a support program to increase the number of Russian artists at SPAR.

Overall, the demographics and the professional background of the artists are very varied. I think that we have a good balance between emerging and established artists. For some of our participants SPAR is the first residency experience, which is always a huge responsibility for us as hosts, and we try to do our best to introduce fresh graduates to the format of an art residency.

Recently we've noticed an increase in the number of applications from US-based artists, which I think is very important given the political tension between our countries — this is when cultural exchange plays a crucial role. Mikhail Piotrovsky – the director of the Hermitage Museum – said in one of his last interviews: the bridge of culture is the last one to be burned. And we strongly support this statement.

I also believe that the artists who come here represent a particular type of person – they are open, curious and creative. And the experience they bring back to their home countries lets them share an insight on modern Russia with the world: its daily life, people and culture. And it's often very different from what is shown by the media.

**Anastasia Patsey** is a curator based in St. Petersburg, Russia and working internationally. She graduated from the St. Petersburg State Stieglitz Art Academy (Department of History and Theory of Visual Arts) and hold a double M. A. degree in curatorial studies of the St. Petersburg State University and the Bard College New York. Since 2012 she is a permanent member of the curatorial team and board member of the “Pushkinskaya-10” — the oldest non-governmental and artist-run cultural institution in Russia founded in 1989. Besides her institutional practice Anastasia Patsey works as an independent curator in Russia and abroad. In 2013 she founded the “2,04 gallery” which functions as a shared art laboratory and project incubator for emerging art professionals. She is co-founder and board member of the “Paideia School of interpretation of contemporary art”, launched in 2014. Since 2012 she is directing the St. Petersburg International Art Residency (SPAR). In Fall 2015 Anastasia Patsey was offered the directorial position at the St. Petersburg Museum of nonconformist art (MoNA) that she currently holds. She is a guest lecturer at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, the Pushkin Leningrad State University and the St. Petersburg State Polytechnic University. Her academic research is dedicated to art residencies, cultural mobility and modern nomadism.

<http://artresidency.ru/>