

Practices | Sep 2018

Dialogues Interviews Liza Matveeva, Project Manager of CEC ArtsLink Back Apartment Residency



A glance to the characteristic, homey spaces offered by CEC ArtsLink Back Apartment Residency. Image courtesy of CEC ArtsLink Back Apartment Residency

Overview

Dialogues interviews **Liza Matveeva**, Project Manager of **CEC ArtsLink Back Apartment Residency** in St. Petersburg (Russia). In this interview we discuss the perks and pitfalls of designing **community engagement projects** in the city and underline the role of residency programs in **bridging different cultures** in critical times.

Liza, when I was scrolling through the list of art residencies based in St. Petersburg, the Back Apartment Residency caught my attention.

What was it named after?

The space is carved out of an old traditional Russian house – with official stairs entrance for wealthy people and back stairs for the servants. The residency space is literally based inside this back-door entrance apartment.

I guess its location has something to do with the residency focus on engaging with the local communities.

Yes, our residents have different interests and practices but they somehow all work to interact with the people who are living in the area or in the surroundings. However, when we started the program, it was very important for us to work specifically with the St. Petersburg's art community so to build these connections especially with artists, historians and curators who live here.

You just talked about the art scene in St. Petersburg.

How would you describe it as a context to operate within?

I would say that St. Petersburg is pretty different from Moscow. Moscow is very active and there is a lot of things happening. Our city is filled with all kinds of museums, but Moscow is more flexible and more sexy in a way, and it is more connected to the international art scene, so you often meet international artists coming in occasion of an exhibition or an artist talk. St. Petersburg is more I would say traditional. We don't have a contemporary art museum at all, whereas Moscow has 4 or 5 different museums – State-owned and private. This shapes the context where contemporary artists are struggling within. Education is also quite traditional and, as a result, artists don't really experiment with photography or new media art. The Hermitage brings more famous artists which is also important for the whole city, but it is really hard for example to meet someone who comes here for research or for an art talk, a studio visit or just really any regular thing that also can shape a context.

From an external point of view – when I look at the St. Petersburg or at the Moscow art scene – I can see many big-scale, internationally-renowned institutions such as the Hermitage and the Garage Art Center which are operating according to some sort of a top-down dynamic.

What about the bottom-up dynamics?

I would say that here it goes by two directions: one is top-down and the other is down to top. Those directions are not connected. So we have institutions which bring and work with established artists and curators and they are all things on top, and we have artists and small institutions which are trying to change the art scene from the bottom. For us, it is important that artists come here to make research first of all. We are not asking them to make final projects because it is nearly impossible – the residency is really short, generally one month – and for us, it is much more important that our residents can develop their own ideas and meet with local people, so they could come back, and continue to do so. We always feel very happy when it happens.

You just said residents are not required to make a final project. Apart from the focus on community engagement, are there any special requirements for artists to come and work at the Back Apartment

Residency?

We request one public event – which can be a workshop or a public talk. We always discuss it with the artists who come here. As you said, the main focus of the residency is public art and socially-engaged art, but it is also quite flexible. Projects can include these aspects, but for example they can be based either on visual art or performance art practices.

Let's talk about CEC ArtsLink. The organization was founded in 1962 and it was originally established to open up new possibilities for public diplomacy between citizens from the former Soviet Union and the United States.

Yes, it was just between the two countries, and it was focused on citizens from all professional backgrounds. More precisely, it was known as Citizen Exchange Corps and enabled ordinary citizens of the United States and the Soviet Union to share ideas and build trust. In 1992, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, CEC ArtsLink created its first platform for artist exchanges, the ArtsLink Awards program. Over the years, we expanded the range of countries we partner with. Today, we have 37 partner countries. In the last years, for instance, we have had people from Finland, Taiwan, India, France and many other countries, but they need to raise funds on their own.

What kind of relationships do you have with other institutions in the United States? Do you have specific ongoing collaborations or programs?

We have two offices, one is in St. Petersburg and the other one is in New York City. In St. Petersburg, we run this residency, Art Prospect, the Public Art Festival and other projects in Central Asia, in former Soviet Union countries. The New York office is responsible for all the programs taking place in the States. CEC ArtsLink has been growing in different directions, but the main idea of the fund is staying the same which I think is very important especially today.

Absolutely. I read the Back Apartment Art Residency is in its third edition. Have you been noticing any recurring topic that international residents have been particularly keen to address over these 3 years?

Not really, but I would say that it has becoming harder and harder to select people because each year the number of applications grows. On our side, we have been improving in understanding quicker how to connect the artists to the local community. When we started, it was unclear for us to know how to introduce them and where should we bring them but now it is kind of – you meet them and you know where you should go. Also, for us it is a good occasion to know the local arts scene as well because still we go to the same openings, we meet with the same people and sometimes we meet others who are a bit more independent and underground, and when the artists come they have many different ideas and we meet also with locals who are not that visible, so I would say that we got better introduced to the local arts scene as well.

This comes to another question. How has been the reception from the local non-art community when faced with the projects you support?

It is always quite challenging, especially when considering that most residencies last only one month. We are asked quite often by artists to find people for their projects, like for interviews. Most of the time there is still a strong language barrier. Older generations are not English-speaking so it is always a challenge. We are always looking for different ways to involve people and that very much depends on

You said the program has been growing over the last 3 years. What are the directions you are hoping for the program to take?

We are still young, and for us it is important to simply continue. This year we have had more artists than ever before and still the majority is Americans. I think it would be interesting to have more Europeans or to have more people from the East coming here, who are closer to us, they are our neighbors. At the moment, we have to work on making each residency more and more productive for every artist we host. These are just small steps to bigger results.

Lizaveta Matveeva focuses on the themes of creative spaces and incubators, self-organizing art initiatives, artist-in-residencies, research based curatorial projects, social engaged art and art as a tool for community engagement. She works as a project manager in the international organization CEC ArtsLink which encourages multi-cultural collaborations between former Soviet republics, Russia and USA. She also co-curated the artist-run space LUDA gallery together with artist and curator Peter Belyi. Lizaveta also curates exhibitions independently in museums, galleries and self-organized spaces (recent shows: Dairy, Museum of Freud's Dreams, St. Petersburg, 2017; Guises. More than Reality, State Theater Museum, St. Petersburg, 2016-2017; Shape of Unseen, Winzavod, Moscow, 2016; The New Blockheads, Moscow Museum of Modern Art, 2016) and advises established institutions about St. Petersburg contemporary art-scene (Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow; New Museum, NYC, USA). She is also one of the founders of the independent artist-run art fair in St. Petersburg, and she recently curated the first art fair SAM Fair at the Museum of Street Art, St. Petersburg.

www.cecartslink.org/grants/back_apartment_residencies

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