INFORMATION ABOUT THE SPAR RESIDENCY (blog 7)

Interview with Anastasia Patsey, director of SPAR, Saint-Petersburg Art Residency, by Mariëlle van den Bergh.  
  
Mlle: *What is SPAR?*

A: SPAR is Saint-Petersburg Art Residency. It is a programme that is located here, at the Art Centre Pushkinskaya-10. It started in 2012 and basically it functions as any residency programme. Visual and performance artists, as well as researchers, curators, writers, and educators come to Pushkinskaya-10 to live and work here on their projects. The period of stay depends on their project proposal and working strategy. This is a grid we follow as in any residency. The special thing about SPAR is that the artists-in-residence here are in a very special environment. The residency studios are located inside the Pushkinskaya-10, a very famous art centre, just next to exhibition spaces, studios of local artists, concert halls etc.

Mlle: *What is the relationship between SPAR and Pushkinskaya-10?*

A: SPAR is one of the programs we run. But we also see it as a separate institution: it has its own team and management system. There are some projects and professional events in which Pushkinskaya-10 is represented by SPAR.

Mlle: *What about the SPAR rooms? How many artists can you host?*A.: It depends. Generally, the SPAR has two apartments. Each of them has its own shared facilities: a kitchen and a bathroom. The first apartment has three residency studios, the other one has two. Usually we have three to five artists, but sometimes there are more. Technically there are resources for up to seven artists, because some studios can accommodate two artists, if they are a couple or a duo. The maximum number of artists-in-residence we had until now at the same time was eight.

Mlle: *What about bringing a spouse or/and children?*

A: We have a visitor-friendly policy. It’s important that artists, who come to live and work here, feel comfortable. So if they are used to travel with their partners or family members or maybe with a pet, they are very welcome to do so. Most of our artists-in-residence have visitors coming over and staying at their place, because it’s always nice to visit a city when you have a personal connection. However, we have very little experience accommodating artists with small children. You should always keep in mind that this is a very vibrant and active place here. It is a lively environment, so it might be rather difficult to find a day or situation when it is quiet and calm - something that small children could need. On the other hand, many kids who grow up in artists families are used to visiting different events, concerts, exhibitions and being in the middle of a community.  
  
Mlle: *What would be the period artists can apply for?*A: Our statistics show that the average stay residency period at SPAR is two months. But of course there are artists who come for a shorter period, for example researchers or curators doing a project residency, networking and meeting people. In this case a couple of weeks are enough for them, as they have a very intensive timetable.   
A couple of years ago we had an artist from Japan, who came to SPAR for six months. When she was leaving, nobody could imagine that she was leaving now for good because in this half a year she really became a member of the community and it was so normal to have her around! Luckily, she returned to participate in one of our group exhibitions a couple of years after her first residency.   
  
Mlle: *What is the shortest time you would take people?*A: It is very important for us to see that the person, who is coming, has a particular plan and a particular aim. It doesn't mean that he or she has to follow this plan. Nor does it mean that they are put under pressure of producing something or implementing the original idea.  
The minimum stay is usually about two weeks. This is the period that is enough to get a basic vision of Saint-Petersburg, its cultural landscape, get in touch with local colleagues, do some networking and maybe even stage a public event, for example an artist’s talk or a workshop.  
  
Mlle: *Is the residency period a fixed period with arrivals at the first of the month and departure at the last day of the month?* *Or are you flexible?*

A: We are very flexible in that. We don't have any particular timetables, nor do we have a fixed deadline. It is a ongoing open call. Usually when artists plan their residency, they pay attention to air fares; when is the cheapest day to fly. It is important that they have the opportunity to save on tickets. So sometimes they arrive in the middle of the night because it was the cheapest flight, which is absolutely fine. It is just an organizational question.  
  
Mlle: *How do artists apply?*

A: There is a ongoing open call, so they can apply any time. We try to review the applications once a month, but it always depends on the number of the applications received.

Mlle: *Do you have a board that reviews the applications?*

A: Usually three to seven people review the applications. We are a small team and everyone is very, very busy. We usually have someone from SPAR, someone from the Art Centre, who is not involved in the residency in particular, and someone from the outside, who is not a staff member, but is familiar with the place, knows about our needs and artistic strategy.

Mlle: *What about the work plan?*

A: It is important for us that the artist includes a basic working plan in the application. It can be a be a part of a project proposal, or it can be an extra attachment. Of course we offer curatorial and administrative support, but it is important for us to see what the artist wants to do and how, and that the artist can work independently. But very often it happens that the artists change their working plan after receiving their first experiences in Saint Petersburg. This is natural and just shows what role the environment of the residency plays and how it influences the artist’s work. In such cases we stay flexible and try to rebuild the working plan in a way that suits everyone.

Mlle: *Is the site of Saint Petersburg also one of the criteria? If you send in a working plan that you could do in Tokyo or in the woods of Canada, it is not necessary to come here…*

A: In a way that is a question about the concept of residencies in general. I believe that a project involving a residency period in a particular place at a particular time should have a connection to this environment and to this context, the local situation. It doesn't mean it must have an obvious connection to Saint Petersburg, for example to its history. If we see a project that could be produced in Tokyo or in Berlin or in another place, we of course ask: why Saint Petersburg? Why does it have to take place at SPAR? It is an important criterion. There are enough residencies in remote places, where artists can work independently on their projects with no involvement in the local situation. However, our institutional identity, the place, its history and the community, as well as St. Petersburg in general are such a strong influence and inspiration that it would be impossible for artists to ignore it in their creative process.

Mlle: *What are the limitations for working at this residency?*

A: We don't have facilities for working with such materials as ceramics, glass or crafts that involve special technical equipment. But we have good contacts to other institutions in Saint Petersburg, that can support our artists-in-residence and let them use their workshops. It can be a printing store, a place where you can do etching, or even a glass and ceramic studio. If we know in advance that the artist requires special facilities, we have enough time to arrange some outsourcing.

Mlle: *The problem with residencies is how to transport your work back home? You could have big, bulky work and how to get it home?*

A: That might be complicated. During the planning period we should consider all the stages of the artist’s working process. Artists are legally allowed to freely cross the border with their own works and we provide all the necessary documents for that. But of course if you work with fragile materials or if you produced a large art object, it can be complicated and expensive to bring it back. Some artists decide to donate their works to the collection of SPAR/Art Centre Pushkinskaya-10. For example, in one of our buildings you can see a sculpture of a girl, made by two Italian artists, who gave us this work. They also created a series of canvases, which remained in the exhibition after they’ve left. Then I took those works back to Milan in a plane during one of my travels. We don’t have enough storage space for art works, so the artists have to take their works back or arrange and pay for the transport. Sometimes we use our own resources to get the works back to artists, but it might take a while.

Mlle: *I know you get more applications than you can provide for as residencies. So how do you select actually?*

A: There are many criteria. It is important that the artist is motivated to work in this place. This is why we ask the artist to provide a motivation letter and explain why they choose Pushkinskaya-10 and SPAR as a place for working on their project. Even though we offer all of our participant regular support they need to have the capacity to work independently and understand how they are going to implement the project. We would not consider an artist, who isn’t used to working without assistants or an artist, who seems to lack technical skills for implementing his or her project idea. It is important that the artist knows what to do and how to do it.   
There are also technical restrictions: we should have a free studio for the time period the artist is applying for. In the application we have a field where one can select the desired dates for the residency. If several successful applicants select the same period and it comes to overlapping schedules, we discuss the timetable individually and try to find a solution that suits everyone.

Mlle: *How far ahead are you planning?*

A: We plan about six to ten months ahead, but sometimes earlier due to funding deadlines. The planning involves a complicated studio schedule and organising final exhibitions and events. We also need time to go through the visa procedures. The artists themselves need enough time to plan everything in connection to their family life, jobs and other projects. We are open to spontaneous applications though and it is worth trying. Because some residencies might have to be rescheduled and sometimes we accept last minute applications.

Mlle: *You also try to fill up the place to be efficient?*

A: We do, but it is not our priority to be fully “booked out”. We value the quality of the artist’s experience and keep some room for unforeseen situations. So usually there is one extra week before and after a residency, for example in case the dates of the flight change. We also need time to take care of the space, do cleaning and technical maintenance in the studios and also give our staff some rest before the start of the next residency.

Mlle: *Are SPAR artists only foreign artists or are there also Russian SPAR artists?*

A: Most of them are foreigners. I am not talking on behalf of the institution now, but speaking for myself: I would love to have more Russian artists applying for the program. But they are usually more interested in residencies abroad: in Europe, Asia and the US. But we work with Russian artists a lot, for instance the museum and galleries invite Russian artists to participate in exhibitions and produce solo projects, and many of them stay at SPAR. There is a very interesting tendency: often artists who have family connections to Russia and to Russian culture, but live abroad apply for residencies. Some artists come from families who emigrated during the Soviet period, and they use this residency opportunity to return to Russia and recover the connection to this culture.  
  
Mlle: *Digging up their roots. What about the costs of the residency?*A: It is not always the same. We have a basic calculation, but from year to year the rate of living costs changes — not only for the residency, but for our whole house. When two people are staying in one studio, it is cheaper for each of them if they share the same living space. When artists have visitors staying for a long period they are charged a small fee to cover the water, electricity and facilities that they are using. At the moment the costs are about €450 per month. Artists are welcome to contact us for details.

Mlle: *But there is also a small amount for the administration costs and if you want an exhibition, there are some extra costs as well.*

A.: Yes, we calculate all this individually depending on the residency period, the project and the resource it requires. For example a couple of times we had artists in the program who were accommodated at another place and just used the studio for their work.

Mlle: *What are the requirements for the artists to be considered?*

A: They have to be at least 18 years old. There are some requirements for receiving a Russian visa, for example a valid health insurance. We accept students, most of them enrolled in MA programs. There is also a language requirement. The official language of the program is English, so the artists are expected to have at least basic English communications skills to get around and communicate with the staff. But we have several working languages: Russian, English, German, French, Italian, Spanish and Polish.   
   
Mlle: *What about the visa? Everybody needs a visa except for Russian artists?*

A: No. There are a number of countries that have a non-visa regime with Russia. For example, South Korea, Argentina, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro and many other countries. They only need an invitation and some other documents that we take care of, but not a visa. Those artists who do need a visa are guided through this process by our project coordinators. It’s not the same in all countries: it is quite simple for EU, but can be complicated for far-away countries like Africa. There is nothing we cannot manage though! We want to keep the paper work for the artists as simple as possible. And when it come to documents and bureaucratic procedures we work with every artist on an individual basis and try to address the needs and circumstances of a particular person.

Mlle: *Where to find information about SPAR?*

A: We have an official homepage, which is artresidency.ru It also includes a blog, where we show the daily life at SPAR. Then we have an account on Instagram and an official page on Facebook. There’s also a newsletter that you are welcome to subscribe to to receive news once a month.

Mlle: *This is quite a noisy building in a big city. That is good to know.*

A: With all of our future artists-in-residence I arrange an individual meeting in Skype, and explain that this residency is nothing like living at home or in a hotel. It is a lively environment, with a whole artistic community, museums, galleries and a club. We sometimes have big and crowded events. It is also connected to our “social” residency model and the networking component. So the artists-in-residence always have other people around, there is always something happening and this is an important feature of SPAR — being in the middle of this creative environment.

Mlle: *What did I forget to ask you?*

A: You can also write about how the final presentations take place and what kinds of things belong to the experience at SPAR, besides work. There are some community events, and we often go to visit events taking place on different venues in Saint Petersburg. Artists are invited to join the local art life here and become its active participants.

Mlle: *Yes! That is very intense. You can spend all your time only doing this. There is so much to do and see here in Saint Petersburg! You definitely have to select what you want to do.*

*Thank you very much for the interview and if artists want to have specific information, they can always contact you.*