# *Art on Site*: Lessons Learnt from a Russian-German Residency Project

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## Background

Art on Site was an ambitious residency project in the field of visual arts carried out together by the Russian *National Centre for Contemporary Arts* (NCCA) and the German federal cultural centre *Goethe Institute* in the years 2008-2009. To a very sizeable degree it was sponsored by the European Union. The project consisted of upcoming German artists spending two separate 2-4 week residencies at the NCCA branches of five Russian cities (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Yekaterinburg, Kaliningrad). During their stay the artists were asked to produce a work of art that “reacted” to the new environment. The respective works were first displayed at local exhibitions and then gathered in one final exhibition in Moscow as part of the III Moscow Biennale (special program). This final exhibition also included the works of Russian artist from each city, thereby allowing for a comparison of the view from within and the view from without.

The German artists participating in the project were: B. Bergmann (St. Petersburg), the duo “Empfangshalle” (Kaliningrad), V. Lewandowsky (Moscow), A. Meyer-Brandis (Yekaterinburg), C. Schmacke and R. Scheipner (Nizhny Novgorod). The choice of artists was not an arbitrary one. It was made on the basis of a field trip to Germany by the curators of the NCCA branches, during which they visited a whole range of artists interested in the residency project. The Russian artists participating in the final exhibition were: O. Blyablyas (Kaliningrad), the duo “Provmyza” (Nizhny Novgorod), A. Rudyev (St. Petersburg), V. Zakharov (Moscow), the group “Where dogs run to” (Yekaterinburg). These were specially chosen by the NCCA curator Irina Gorlova.

## Lessons Learnt

**0. An absolute prerequisite: the local partner.**

Residencies cannot be realized without a reliable local partner who disposes of a wide ranging network within the country. This is in fact such a basic insight that it can hardly be called a lesson learnt, yet it should be mentioned all the same. In the case of *Art on Site* we were happy to have such a partner, namely the NCCA with both its network in major Russian cities and their professional staff.

**1. Residency projects are an effective, suitable and topical format to foster exchange in the field of visual arts.**

Residency programs are a fairly old format and traditionally wide-spread in the Western world. In Germany, for example, even very small towns take pride in offering accommodation for a certain period of time to artists or writers from outside. The silent hope (if not an explicit condition) is always that these visitors will in one way or the other react to the new context and produce a work of art in which the host town can recognize itself. Was *Art on Site* successful in this respect? The facts speak for themselves: seven German artists have been made to spend a considerable amount of time in Russian cities they had in most parts never seen before. They have acquainted themselves with an unknown environment and have reacted to it by producing works of art which indeed turned out to be *extremely site-specific*: a mosaic made of amber depicting the winner of a beauty contest organized by “Empfangshalle” in Kaliningrad; an installation in a historic tower in Nizhny Novgorod; a mineralogical excurse/performance in Yekaterinburg that even involved a cameo by the director of the local stone museum etc. But what about the cultural exchange itself? Did the German visitors meet up with their Russian counterparts and became involved in the local art scenes? Did they even start to develop joint projects with their colleagues? The answer to this questions touches upon the second lesson learnt.

**2. Residency projects imply a lot of work on the part of the organizers, both in the run-up to the project as well as during the residencies themselves and even after their official end.**

The meticulous work involved in choosing the right artists has been described above. Apart from that *Art on Site* certainly required the usual kind of (exacting) preparation common to a project of this size. This is what the project organizers expected. However, what we were not altogether aware of at the inception of the project was that having the artists over in Russia actually meant a lot of active work *during their stays* and only by putting in considerable effort the organizers were able to ensure an active exchange of the visitors with the local artists. Saying this one must be aware of the fact that there is no way of enforcing such an exchange (and, to be sure, it did not work out in all cases). A real *collaboration* in the sense of a common artistic project will always remain an exception totally dependent on the artistic personalities. One should, however, try and facilitate *exchange* by ensuring suitable surrounding conditions. Incidentally, this may at times also include organizing the help of an interpreter – be it a capable language student – in order to overcome language barriers that can otherwise still be a hindrance in some places. To sum up: the lesson learnt, then, is that if an explicit objective of a residency precisely lies in the exchange achieved then the organizers of the project need to be prepared for a considerable amount of additional work. If, moreover, the artists are to produce “real art” by the end of the project, the work not only on the part of the artists but also on the part of the organizers increases even further. This particular lesson learnt will be discussed in the following paragraph.

**3. Production residencies are more stressful – and very rewarding.**

For obvious reasons it is very desirable for the project organizers to have real works of art produced by the end of the residency. They are show pieces, they make the artists’ reaction to the place visible and they can – at best – become lasting monuments of the exchange. In the case of *Art on Site*, for instance, the German artist Via Lewandowsky agreed to leave his work of art “Kak zhal” to the Moscow NCCA to be displayed in their future museum. The “golden crater”, a central ingredient of A. Meyer-Brandis performance in Yekaterinburg, may with some luck also remain there for the public to be seen. In these cases the residencies attain yet another purpose, which the organizers in fact did not originally have in mind. Notwithstanding this, however, it needs to be said, that these so called “production residencies”, i.e. residency where the participating artists agree on the production of a work of art during their stay, put a significant pressure on the artists. This may, as one of the participating artists wondered, also be one reason why in four out of five places the German artists included to a greater or lesser extent performative aspects in their works, as these are by definition dependent on chance and not expected “to be perfect” (another reason certainly being the extremely moderate money for the artists). In other words, with respect to the “end product” there is a trade off between the interest of the project organizers and the interest of the artists.

**4. Intercultural misunderstanding will invariably occur – care should be taken to properly address them.**

If we all understood each other from the very beginning there would hardly be a reason to put in such a lot of effort to organize residencies for foreign artists. In other words: intercultural misunderstandings are not an “accident” or a freak case but rather the common state of things. The project organizers should, therefore, be prepared to encounter difficulties resulting from exactly these intercultural misunderstandings and should think of productive ways to handle them. For once it seems sensible to accommodate for an introduction into the other culture at the inception of the project (something the organizers of *Art on Site* with hindsight would do in one way or the other). Such an introduction should focus less on traditional cultural matters but more on the practical consequences of some of these differences. For example, while in Germany the physical mounting of an exhibition is done by special workers in the museums and galleries, in Russia the artist himself takes an active part in it and is in fact expected to do so. Other differences between the countries have similar, very material consequences that should be pointed out in advance. Still, there is no way to predict all possible misunderstandings beforehand. Project organizers should therefore arrange for special “formats” where the participating artists (of both sides) can actually talk about these differences in an informal way.

## Recommendations

### Challenge I: Legislation

Today visa even in the field of cultural exchange can only be obtained for a period of three months. For residencies lasting longer than 3 months this is a nuisance. On an even more general level it needs to be pointed out that treatment of visa applicants in Russian institutions is in many cases not designed to create a happy welcome for the future guests. It is recommended that in cases of residencies lasting longer than 3 months visa can be obtained for a period of at least one year.

### Challenge II: Partners/state of mind

It has already been pointed out that a realiable local partner with a solid network and a good appreciation of the risks and benefits of a residency is an absolute prerequisite of the success of such a project. In Russia, it seems, there are still few organizations that can meet the challenges connected with a residency program. This is, certainly, a logistic problem in many cases, e.g. it would obviously be great to dispose of an appratment that could be used for such a stay – something few organisations or administrative bodies do. Yet it seems to be more than that. Not a sufficient number of institutions and/or local and regional administrations seem to be fully aware of the huuge potential of residency programs. Much more should be done to raise this awareness. It is for this reason that the Goethe Institute has decided to organise a conference dedicated precisely to this problem in June 2010. Official support could considerably increase the effect of this.

### Challenge III: Public art

Public art, i.e. art in the public space, in Russia seems to be encumbered by a very beaurocratic, intransparent process of approval. The project organizers of Art on Site thus very soon abandoned any plan to include such an element in the project. It would, in our mind, be a great stimulus for society in general, if these procedures were made clearer to everybody.