

AWAY
The Book
about
Residencies

It All Started with Rome – The Geographical Timeline of the International Residency Destinations of the BMKOES

Alexandra Uedl

Based on the scholarship for artistic studies in Rome (renamed “scholarship for further artistic education in Rome” in 1978) that each year funded stays in Rome for one or two Austrian artists from 1974 to 1978 and for three or four artists later on, the Arts and Culture Division developed the institutionalized International Residency Program in the mid-1980s. In the center of the Eternal City, close to Piazza Navona, the first independent studio abroad opened in 1985. Until 2017 it was shared by visual artists and, from 1988 on, also by photographic artists. But why Rome? For the artists and educated tourists (mainly from England) of the 17th to 19th century, Italy’s capital was a must-see on their Grand Tour to the great cultural sites of Europe. A more recent model was the German Academy which also set up its studio program launched in 1913 in Rome, at the Villa Massimo. In addition to those historic ideals, there were also practical reasons for Rome as a pioneer destination: “We received much support for the project from the Austrian embassy and the Cultural Forum in Rome, which, of course, made organization easier.”¹

In 1985, Paris, another classic art metropolis, was added as the second destination of the Program – integrated into the studio program of the Cité Internationale des Arts, founded in 1965.

Europe Grows –

and so does the Program. The International Residency Program responded to the fall of the Iron Curtain at the end of the 1980s by including new destinations in the former “East”. Soon after the opening-up of the ČSSR, an autonomous live-in studio for visual artists opened in Prague in 1990. In 1991, another studio followed in Cracow, Poland – in the middle of the Jewish quarter of Kazimierz. And from 1995, Austrian artists moved into a tower-like studio linked to the Egon-Schiele-Art-Centrum in Český Krumlov. Discovering the former crown lands, finding part of one’s own history in a foreign land, meeting artists who had only been able to take a critical stand covertly, getting to know nations re-inventing themselves and experiencing change and the start of a new era – whatever artists made of this situation for themselves, it was a historic moment that opened up for them in the International Residency Program. “Organization was easier in these countries because the embassies showed great interest.”² According to Joseph Secky, the feedback of the artists always was particularly intense. While the studio in Český Krumlov was maintained until 2017, the one in Prague already closed in 1995 and the one in Cracow in 1999.

When Berlin became the capital of reunited Germany and developed into Europe’s hotspot that magically attracted creative people from all over the world, a studio place was set up in cooperation with Künstlerhaus Bethanien not far from the former Berlin Wall from 1994 to 1997.

London Calling –

seems to be a persistent siren’s call for Austrian artist. In 1994, the International Residency Program opened a “painter’s studio” in the British capital that was affiliated with the renowned studio program of ACME. In the same year, an autonomous studio for photographers was established. It was a live-in studio housed in the Victorian building that also accommodated visual artists from 1994 to 2001.

Most Artists Want to Go to America

The New York studios have always ranked top among the destinations. While 50 candidates apply elsewhere, there are up to 200 artists who want to spend their residency in the Big Apple. But before the residencies in New York, an independent live-in studio opened in Chicago, Illinois, in 1990, and offered space for artistic development to around 60 visual artists up to 2015. “Contacts to an Austrian gallerist active in Chicago helped organize the first ‘overseas’ destination.”³

For many artists, the icon among the destinations continues to be the residency at P.S.1: Founded by Alanna Heiss in 1976, the former off-space P.S.1 located in Queens soon became a must-go museum. Being a pioneer of the alternative spaces movement, Heiss was able to accommodate the related studio program in the historical Clocktower Building (owned by New York City) in Lower Manhattan that also housed her legendary Clocktower Gallery. From 1992 to 2004, one Austrian artist (and 14 international colleagues) had space and time to immerse into the vibrant life of New York and to focus on their own work for an entire year. The cooperation partner P.S.1 selected the artist from a short list drawn up by an Austrian jury.

Moreover, from 1991 to 1997, the artists were offered an impressive loft studio at the resounding address of 810, Broadway, situated on the seventh floor of a townhouse built in 1907, and were able to use it for six months. This epitome of a cool location has left its mark on the life of many an artist – whoever stayed there as an artist-in-residence had numerous visitors. “The address was well known among Austrian artists and thus, many of them simply dropped in when they were in New York”,⁴ organizers Olga Okunev and Bernd Hartmann explain.

After those two studios were closed (at the P.S.1 because of a radical change in the program of the cooperation partner), the residencies for visual artists continued at the renowned International Studio & Curatorial Program, ISCP for short (founded in 1994) – at first in Hell’s Kitchen, Manhattan, and then in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Every year since 1998, two artists have been offered a six-month residency within the framework of the ISCP which nowadays has more than 35 studio places for artists and curators. The apartment coming with the residency is situated in Manhattan’s West Village.

Since 1994, photographers have stayed in an apartment on the 20th floor of the Chelsea Tower in Chelsea with a breath-taking view of Manhattan. Like the visual artists, they have been integrated into the successful ISCP with an additional studio room since 2018. “It was difficult to find suitable properties in New York – the Cultural Institute played an important role in this context.”⁵ From 2024 on, the two studios located in New York are to be offered for 4-month residencies.

In both geographical and organizational terms, the studio in Mexico City was unique. In 2003, it was set up in a garden pavilion on the premises of the Austrian embassy in Mexico, which resulted in safe, but sometimes also slightly aloof living and working conditions for the artists-in-residence. From 2019 on, this studio has not been included in the calls anymore.

Studying the Far East

The first destination on the Asian continent was found with the embassy’s help in a Japanese village, a two-hour drive to the west of Tokyo in 1992. Fujino represented the “faraway, strange world” not only with regard to culture and language, but also with regard to the living conditions as the artists travelled back in time. While the discovery of traditional country life was a wonderful experience for some, other artists had problems in coming to terms with this simple lifestyle. The studio building was one of the few extant traditional Japanese country houses still having, for example, paper walls. The artists received support from a former teacher in the artists’ village of Fujino (in the middle of the jungle inhabited by all kinds of creatures). Joseph Secky adds that the artists who stayed in Fujino have kept in touch with each other up to now. In 2007, Fujino was abandoned in favor of a studio in the center of Tokyo.

Chengdu (2000-2015), Nanjing (2007-2009), Beijing (2008-2020) and Shanghai (since 2003) broadened the range of Far Eastern studios in the program. The strong representation of China among the destinations can be explained by the opening-up of the Chinese art scene, several large exhibitions of Austrian artists in China and the great interest of Chinese partner institutions in cooperating with Austria.

The two older studios situated in China were affiliated with universities in megacities (Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, with a population of 14 million and Nanjing, the capital of Jiangsu, with 6 million people). “At the opening, the sole representative of the Division was faced with a fully-fledged delegation of Chinese officials as if it was a smaller state reception,”⁶ remembers Bernd Hartmann.

In 2011, the BMKOES opened a studio for visual and media artists in Yogyakarta on the Indonesian island of Java. This city is considered to be the cultural center of Indonesia or even South-East Asia. The local cooperation partner was the Sewon Art Center. The destination of Yogyakarta was closed in 2019. The “Asian” residencies that are here to stay are Beijing – in a small village on the periphery of the metropolis –, Shanghai where the studio is located in the middle of the big city, and Tokyo.

“Tokyo will always be a special destination for me – in 2011 the nuclear disaster of Fukushima confronted us with the major challenge of flying out our artists-in-residence as fast as possible, which we managed to do within two days thanks to good cooperation with the embassy and the artists.”⁷ To be on the safe side, the Tokyo studio remained vacant in the following two seasons. It is worth noting that the studio building is located in Tokyo’s Arakawa-Ku district which makes it available at a favorable rent as Arakawa-Ku is a twinning partner of Vienna’s Donaustadt district.

The (former) Newcomers in the Program

In 2011, a studio opened in the old city center of Istanbul. Although it is managed autonomously, it is well networked with the local art scene. Turkey’s changed political situation also impacted the attitude among the artists towards this destination: “We observe decreased interest in or more reservations about Istanbul. But those who apply are often highly motivated and specifically interested in the current situation on site.”⁸

From 2012 to 2022, Austrian artists have been able to submit concrete projects in the field of media art for a residency at the renowned Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity (Canada) in the midst of the Rocky Mountains. In 2017 and 2018, the BMKOES cooperated with the WIELS Contemporary Art Center in Brussels whose study program offers visual artists a studio and comprehensive support services.⁹

In 2018, the BMKOES expanded its International Residency Program by two further destinations. With Herzliya, artists have access to a studio affiliated with The Artists’ Residence Herzliya (approx. 30 minutes from Tel Aviv) in Israel. A studio was also opened in Moscow in cooperation with the study program of the artists’ initiative CCI Fabrika that had to be closed again due to the political situation in 2022. “The studio in Herzliya was initiated by the Austrian cultural attaché in Tel Aviv who contacted us with a proposal for cooperation on a residency. The Moscow studio resulted from the long-standing wish of our department to give artists the opportunity to explore the exciting local scene there.”¹⁰

Consolidation during exceptional times

The COVID pandemic raised major challenges for the International Residency Program and everybody involved – travel plans had to be postponed and award procedures had to be frozen. Some residencies, such as the studios of the Cité in Paris, remained in use in spite of the pandemic. New York’s ISCP moved its entire program to the virtual space, the Tokyo studio was used by an Austrian artist who happened to be on site and the studio located in Moscow’s Fabrika was made available to local artists for the implementation of Austria-related projects on an interim basis. The period 2019-2022 also turned out to be a consolidation phase for the International Residency Program of the BMKOES during which new ideas and expansion plans were developed.

Openness as a program

In FREE AWAY, the International Residency Program of the BMKOES not only addresses artists, but also curators for the first time. Thus, the Program is in line with the development towards interdisciplinarity that is currently seen in the arts themselves. The studios of the International Residency Program of the BMKOES are usually awarded across genres – unless the cooperation partner focuses on a specific domain or unless required by spatial conditions or technical equipment.

In Helsinki, the International Residency Program opens its first Scandinavian art residency in 2024 (in cooperation with the Helsinki International Artist Program/HIAP). Two studios will be available on an alternating basis – one is located in the Cable Factory, an industrial building that developed into a cultural center in the 1990s and the other one is situated on Suomenlinna, a small island off the coast and Unesco World Heritage site that can be reached in 15 minutes by ferry from Finland's capital.

Also from 2024 on, the International Residency Program of the BMKOES offers a new art residency in Lithuania's capital Vilnius (in cooperation with RUPERT). The studio is located in a modern atelier complex, affiliated with an interdisciplinary public program and stands out by its special location – in a green area not far from the city center and close to a small beach by the Neris River. The Vilnius studio is awarded annually for a two-month art residency.

Through FREE AWAY, the BMKOES radically expands the boundaries of its own Program: For the first time, calls are open not only to visual and media artists but also to curators. FREE AWAY is designed as a self-organized stay abroad with the beneficiaries being able to freely select the place and time of their art residency. From 2024 on, FREE AWAY will award ten art residencies per year – preferably for an art residency affiliated with a studio program or for a concrete project. In the first year, FREE AWAY funds art residencies in Greece, Japan, Lithuania, Italy, Greenland, Thailand and the Netherlands.

- 1 Interview with Joseph Secky, Vienna, 23 May 2018.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Interview with Bernd Hartmann, Vienna, 4 June 2018.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Interview with Joseph Secky, Vienna, 23 May 2018.
- 6 Interview with Bernd Hartmann, Vienna, 4 June 2018.
- 7 Interview with Olga Okunev, Vienna, 4 June 2018.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*

The information is based on interviews that Alexandra Uedl and Alexandra Gausam conducted with Joseph Secky (former head of Department II/1 of the Arts and Culture Division from 1984 to 2009 and co-founder of the Program), Bernd Hartmann (member of Department II/1 and its head from 2009 to 2013), and Olga Okunev (head of Department IV/A/6 of the Arts and Culture Division in the Federal Ministry for Art, Culture, the Civil Service and Sport since 2021), complemented by information provided by Gudrun Schreiber (head of Department II/1 from 2014 to 2020) and Sigrid Olbrich-Krampl-Hiebler (member of Department IV/A/6).