

FIVE FOUR, MORE LESS

Visual artist Gracia Khouw had an artist's Residency from June to August this year at ISCP New York. Her work consists of paintings, murals and (digital) prints. In her work she explores language both visually and acoustically, taking inspiration from visual data and symbols from everyday life, such as billboards, advertisements and icons. She creates minimal arrangements with which she turns our interpretation of letters and their symbolic meaning upside down. Just as a word loses its meaning when it is incessantly repeated, so the artist lets images float between abstract designs and recognizable letters and symbols.

On June 2, I arrived in New York and started a residency at ISCP in Brooklyn. ISCP stands for International Studio Curatorial Program; the building at the end of Metropolitan Avenue is on the edge of urban residential area where it turns into business district. There are huge, tooting trucks and vans turning on or off at the junction with Grand Street.

The block to which the building is attached also houses other creative companies and artists. The part of the property where ISCP is located has 35 studios. After you are buzzed in, you will find yourself in a project space with three offices. My studio is located on the corner of the building on the 2nd floor, where there is the ISCP bookcase and the window overlooks the roof terrace and skyline of Manhattan. In the distance you can see Queens. I share the lounge, kitchen and toilet with five artists from Taiwan, New Zealand, Japan, Italy and Argentina. Although you can hear the traffic noise in the studio, but you can also clearly see the semi-industrial landscape.

I'm here to work on my project for three months. My work consists of letters and images, compositions on paper, on panels or on walls, sometimes using whole words, sometimes only a letter or a sound. During this residency I want to work on a project that I have been thinking about for a long time, but have not yet had the mental space to tackle. The working title is FIVE FOUR, MORE LESS, which takes as its starting point a collection of common English four-letter words. These are words that everyone in the world knows. Moreover, I will use an iconic artwork—Robert Indiana's LOVE letter-image—as a format. In this simple two-by-two-letter arrangement, the meaning of the word and letters' shapes with their corresponding negative shapes are equal. Actually, using words only provides an excuse or a lure or an armature for the image. I did not know how these images would look like, even though I had sketched a few probes at home. That's why I wanted to get started as soon as possible. In addition, I was curious about how English speakers see the letter images and what associations they have with them. I wanted to start a dialogue with it.

The ISCP proved to be the right place for this. The visiting critics program, for example, offers a variety of curators and arts reviewers who visit the studio. Every month you can sign up for a one-hour conversation. Four curators visited me and I told them about the project I'm working on.

Outside the ISCP program, I already had a few contacts from my visit in 2011. Together with a friend who already knew some artists, I met other artists and visited their studios. Since then, I have strengthened these contacts, due to joint group exhibitions in The Netherlands and in the USA. This network offered me tremendous support to be here and go to openings

together, and to be introduced to other artists. The generosity with which you are brought into a circle of friends makes you feel welcome.

I visited seven studios in New York: in mid-town and uptown Manhattan, and in Brooklyn's East Williamsburg and Sunset Park, and also in New Jersey, including Newark and a gallery and studio in Jersey City. The artists I visited came, in turn, to visit my studio. I enjoyed the conversations that arose about each other's work and visiting these places. The work gave rise to conversations, which covered a large range of subjects and could be anything. Many artists have a busy existence; most teach at academies or have a full-time office job.

ISCP has a program coordinator who organizes lectures and excursions almost every week, which you can sign up for. I participated in the field trips to the Judd Foundation in SoHo, the Socrates Sculpture Park, and the studio and house of Martha Rosler. We also went on an overnight field trip at The School (Jack Shaiman Gallery) in Kinderhook, MassMoca, Williamstown College Museum, and The Clark Institute. In most places we had a guided tour.

At the beginning of the residency, during the introduction of artists and staff, the director of ISCP, Susan Hapgood offered a studio visit herself, "whenever you're ready." That moment came for me in the third week of my stay. At a studio visit, she asked me whom I wanted to meet. I asked if she knew artist Kay Rosen. The same afternoon, she introduced us by e-mail. On another occasion, we were invited to a drink at her home in Chelsea and then to walk to the openings of a few galleries. Her personal involvement helps you make the most of your stay; it is characteristic of her and extremely important to the experience. The same goes for the whole ISCP staff.

Within the program there are opportunities to talk about your work. 'Salons' are short bi-monthly public presentations by ISCP participants. In addition, there are studio presentations called "One Artist, One Work," which are not public. At the end of my stay, the timing did not work out for me to participate. That's why I decided to hold a mini-open studio in my workspace, for which I invited friends from New York to come and see the outcome of my three-month residency.

Although I speak English fairly well, I noticed that my vocabulary is insufficient to initiate a deeper dialogue about my work. This awareness is sometimes frustrating because you cannot really understand what is being said and cannot convey exactly what you mean and how to respond. The English language has many words to formulate different nuances. My impression of some of the *artists' talks* I attended is that people are more associative and speak more freely. Approaching a particular topic opens different ways of thinking that were not obvious to me. In general, I come across a freedom, openness, and courtesy in the artistic circles I have participated in over the last three months.

You can apply directly for an ISCP residency. Moreover, you can also apply via the Mondriaan Fund; the permanent studios and their corresponding funding then come via the fund. If you apply directly, then you have to finance the residency and the housing yourself. I was able to afford this residency because of crowd funding at Voordekunst.nl, and with a 'Proven Talent' (= Bewezen Talent) grant from the Mondriaan Fund.

In searching for housing, I found myself in several districts: in June I stayed in Bushwick, and in July and August at Lefferts Garden near Prospect Park, both in Brooklyn. August I

spent in SoHo in Manhattan. You will get to know the city better if you travel by public transport. Outside the ISCP circuit you will encounter people with surprising contacts. My roommate in the apartment in Lefferts Garden turned out to have contacts with an interesting art complex in New Jersey, for example. I found a property on Stephanie Diamond Listings, a weekly list of sublet apartments and opportunities for New York and other cities. A bonus is that I have also gotten to know the subway system better. I purchased an unlimited MTA card and was able to access ISCP from different residential addresses. Sometimes during rush hour it took 1 hour and 15 minutes, other times I was there in 25 minutes. New Yorkers make good use of the crowded metro; there are often conversation about how long it takes to get from A to B.

Is there three months enough time to get something out of your residency? Yes and no. On the one hand, time is too short to build relationships, which take years, which is the same in The Netherlands. But this period is great for transforming existing relationships into closer contacts and especially to develop, experiment with, and discuss a specific part of your work.

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