

Interconnection: life and art in a forgotten Russian town

by Gillian McIver

1 – Kronstadt – the arrival

As the crow or gull flies over Kotlin Island, its tiny eye will be puzzled about what it sees on the land below. On the right side of the island lies the town of Kronstadt. Or is it a town? From the air it looks more like the mechanistic workings of a giant clock or other device, vast in scale, but every part measured and fixed, purposeful and precise. A great machine carved into the landscape, surrounded by the straggly fixtures of a town.

In June 2004, we, the Luna Nera group of artists, made our second residency in the town of Kronstadt, a settlement founded in 1704 by Peter the Great on Kotlin Island in the Gulf of Finland. The aim of the residency was to continue our encounter with this unique urban space, and to make interventions in the landscape as well as to create a body of work for future exhibition.

Our first project, “Cross Encounters”, was about the initial encounter with the place. We had come to Kronstadt almost by accident, an invitation formed by chance meetings and unexpected coincidence. On our second visit we stayed longer, and attempted to dig deeper.

By the standards of most European settlements, Kronstadt is very new, only 300 years old, but has an astonishing amount of unique and significant marine architecture. Peter I (“the Great”) built Kronstadt as the most modern structure in the world, a showcase for military-naval architecture of its time. No expense was spared from the vast Imperial Russian coffers in its construction. The town was built around a complex system of canals and pools which ensured that provisioning, repairing and re-launching of the ships could be done quickly and efficiently like a machine. The entire town served this process. For centuries it was the pride of the Russian navy, imperial and Soviet. Until the 1980’s the town boasted a Letniy Sad (summer garden) with a concert bowl for jazz and classical concerts and an underground ice house for cooling drinks and ice creams all summer long; clubs and concessions provided entertainment and leisure for all. In the late 1980’s big construction programs began to link the island to the mainland with a new bridge and with an underwater tunnel. But in 1989 everything suddenly just stopped.

A town of some 40,000 people, the official unemployment rate is 50%, but locals assert that the true figure is something like 70 or even 80%. Of course, many work in the city of St. Petersburg on the mainland. Until 1989 most people were involved in or employed by the military. Now most of these jobs have gone, only the naval school is hanging on. So the stark shock of change is still evident in the life of the community.

Until 1996, Kronstadt was a closed area to all foreigners, and to most Russians. The fascinating Petrine-era and later architecture, its vast naval storehouses and canals, its elegant palaces and exquisite naval cathedral were known only in illustrations. However, now Kronstadt is in a state of transition as the systems that supported and maintained its splendour have disappeared.

Art as a means of regenerating moribund communities is an accepted practice in the west (with mixed results) and had not been tried before in Russia. Our mission in Kronstadt in both projects was not to create an exhibition, or a permanent art space, but rather to create a creative atmosphere for art practice, and to open the debate about the possible role of art in activating interest in the local community.

2 - Interconnection – bringing contemporary art to Kronstadt

“Interconnection” attempted to explore trans-communication, bringing artists and local people together to create something new out of what was already there. The experience of being resident in Kronstadt was not an end in itself, but part of an ongoing process. Russian artists from St. Petersburg, Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod joined Luna Nera’s own international contingent (Canadian, German, Italian and British). Together we sought a unifying theme and jumping-off point from which to begin to look at this unique site.

We found our theme in radio. By sighting a plaque on the wall of one building, we found that Kronstadt was one of the sites where wireless communication was first created. Alexander Popov was a naval scientist who made the first known radio transmission, in Kronstadt in 1895. Followed soon after by Marconi and others, Popov could have had no idea that his efforts to create a system to rescue ships in distress would usher in a totally new era of media culture that would affect the entire world in a very short time. The theme of the project thus became “HOMAGE TO POPOV.”

During the residency we made audio art from field recordings of material collected in Kronstadt and St. Petersburg – conversations, explanations, medium and short-wave radio broadcasts, old recordings found in the flea market, the metro and taxibus, ships passing, and so on. Artist Eugene Strelkov collected audio waves from the Baltic Sea. And we explored the mysterious structures found all over Kotlin: the navy’s mechanical system of locks and channels; the cranes that have stood still for fourteen years; the enormous “cemetery” of marine detritus scattered on the shore; the necklace of sea forts offshore on tiny man made islands; the harbour bristling with warships; the military parade welcoming the new sailors to Kronstadt, and the 18th century fortress, used in the failed rebellion of 1921 and, more successfully, to keep the Nazi fleet from making a final assault upon St. Petersburg.

Immersion in the life of Kronstadt had its own issues. The Western artists were fascinated by its unique layout and architecture, while aspects of the living conditions were daunting. To the Russian participants, however, most incredible was actually working in this place, long known only from reputation and legend. Living our daily lives there was unusual too because it was White Nights, so the sun did not set, and all night long the island was awake and active, with people eating and drinking and strolling under the pink twilight sky.

At the conclusion of the residency, we held an open air live art event with a picnic. We set up several installations, and a large army tent on a grassy verge in the town centre surrounded by trees, where we presented video animations and digital photo-slide shows made during our sojourn. Outside we set up a mini “pirate radio” station

“The opening of the site to art is a brief, interventionist moment, not a permanent condition.”



Video animation by Valentina Floris at Kronstadt’s Interconnection

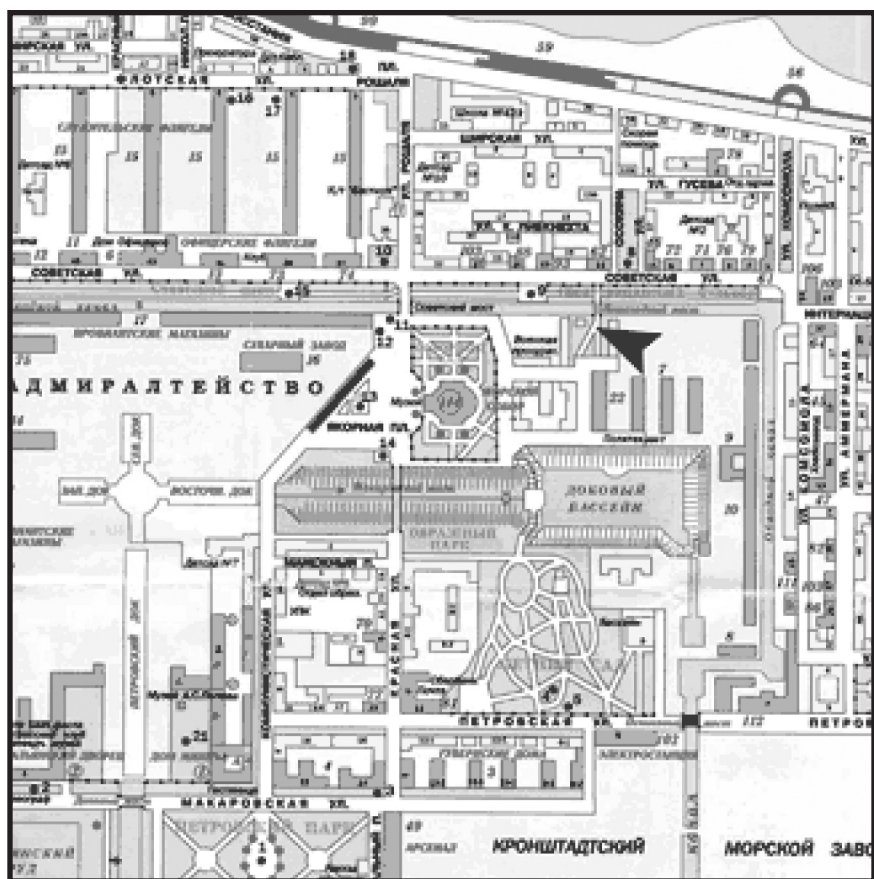


Kronstadt in 1887 -

The arrow shows the site of the project Kronstadt 2004 Interconnection.

Kronstadt today -

The arrow shows our site again, but as you can see some new things have been added since 1887, as well as many blocks of flats and the splendid Naval Cathedral (completed 1913). However many of the features of two centuries ago such as the harbour, parks, the canals and basins, are still there and dominate the island's landscape.



with dozens of small radios (sourced from markets and junk shops) embedded in the ground and hung in the trees, all tuned to the same FM station, broadcasting audio-mixes via a very low-frequency signal. As the site was in public space by the canal path, it was open to all to take part.

We were initially afraid that it might be difficult to make contact with the life of the community, especially as, aside from our two interventions, there was never any attempt to bring contemporary art there before. The organisation that hosted us unfortunately disapproved of the idea that so-called "simple people" would be involved and invited to the project. However, when we presented our work to them, the locals came, and

found it interesting. They appreciated the fact that we showed them an outsider's view of the place, and invited them to see their familiar environment in a new way.

3 - permanence and transience: site specificity and site research

The period of our residence in Kronstadt was one of impermanence and transience. Likewise, the work that we produced in the form of audio recordings, video and photography is mutable, reproducible and transferable into different media. What we have done in Kronstadt and in other similar projects¹, is create something which is site-responsive rather than narrowly site-specific. The act of responding to and creating out of, situations and environments that are themselves fluid and mutable is different from "making work" which is specific to a particular physical space - implying permanence and immutability.

The nomadic principle is at work here, and in similar projects bringing artists together across national and cultural boundaries. The great changes of the modern world - since 1989 for example - have caused artists as well as everyone else to

react to the ease of movement of people and cultural products around the globe. Whether this is a new freedom, or simply a reaction to change, is impossible to determine.

Working in such a unique place highlights many issues around art and site-response. Is site-response as art practice a temporary reaction to specific social, political and economic situations and discourses? Or is it a new direction or movement in art, marked by close interaction with specific realities and hybrid media? Perhaps it is far too early in the history of this fragile and tentative movement to make any conclusions.

The peculiar subtle difference of site-response as opposed to site-specific, which involves an insistence on the actual dialectic between artist and all aspects of the space, not only the physical, means that there may be less

chance for any characteristic mode of operation to occur. There is great potential for site-responsive art to develop this dialectic, to constantly create fresh interventions into "everyday life" while at the same time universalising through art the concerns that are, at their base, bound in human time and space.

Hence, the opening of the site to art is a brief, interventionist moment, not a permanent condition. A consciousness not only of time but of change or flux is at the very foundation of this type of work. Different experiences of time and change intersect: historical time (the lived experience of the site); material time (the materials used); experiential time (the actual period of the intervention). The particular experience of being Kronstadt on its tercentennial anniversary, made us conscious of the three hundred years of time and change to consider. Our task became the act of transcribing the specific and particular moment of our intervention, into the shared or non-specific language of art.

4 - What we brought and what we left behind

Our Kronstadt work has been exhibited in Berlin and Montreal, and is available on a DVD and online where it can reach innumerable audiences. This is one example of the "particular to the universal" that site-responsive work is empowered to do. We hope that exhibiting this project will both stimulate an interest in Kronstadt itself, and to show how site-responsive art can begin a dialogue to help communities reappraise and re-value their locality. At the same time, our experience of Kronstadt awakened us to some very real and specific aspects of life in the post-Soviet system.

While we were there, the anniversary of the beginning of the Second World War was marked on Kronstadt. For Russia, the nation which suffered the most in the war, this will always be a sad and sober occasion. But in Kronstadt as we watched bus and boatloads of retired admirals and captains pour into the little town, in threadbare uniforms, from places as far flung as Murmansk, Solchi and Vladivostok, we could sense their sadness, not at the passing of time and change, but at the sacrifice and disinheritance of these people. Several kilometres away, the city of St. Petersburg, which Kronstadt spent 300 years defending, shone with its newly-painted facades and glittering shops, as insubstantial as air to the sombre-faced old sailors strolling by the harbour.

For the people of Kronstadt, who have seen their historic town fall into decline, there are issues of pride, isolation, opportunities and the impact of globalisation at stake. And so Kronstadt is not only a small island town off the coast of St. Petersburg, but is a microcosm of the world in its state of 21st century flux and uncertainty, where wealth and poverty exist side by side but rarely touching, where a sense of the past and one's place in it is continually challenged by feelings of insecurity and the ever-quickenening rush of time.

We hope that exhibiting this project will both stimulate an interest in Kronstadt itself, and to show how site-responsive art can begin a dialogue to help communities reappraise and re-value their locality.

Gillian McIver is a member of the Luna Nera group, and curated the Kronstadt project. Contributing artists were Julian Ronnefeldt (lead artist); Valentina Floris and Ben Foot, Hilary Powell, Agnes Domke, Dirizable Group (Eugene Strelkov, Olga Khan, Andrey Suzdalev, Mikhail Pogarsky) and assistant curator Oleg Ikona.

(Endnotes)

¹ Luna Nera has made site-responsive projects in Berlin, Zurich, London and Nizhny Novgorod (with Dirizable).