

KRONSTADT 2003 “THE WORD OF THE ARTIST”

Gillian McIver



In summer of 2003 Gillian McIver and the Luna Nera group went to make a site-responsive project in Russia. The site was the historic naval fortress town of Kronstadt, which is located about 29km north west of St Petersburg on Kotlin island in the Gulf of Finland. Peter the Great created this sea fortress in 1703, seeing it as a vital extension of the capital on the river Neva. Guarding the approach to the city, for 300 years Kronstadt offered protection to the Russian Empire and became a starting point for many great journeys of exploration out of Russia. Celebrated Russian navigators studied and researched here with many inventions made, tested and pioneered in the town. These include Popov's invention of radio, Butakov's mechanical telegraph, undersea mines, torpedoes and submarines and pioneering anti plague and water chlorination laboratories. But perhaps Kronstadt is best known due its role in the first and last popular armed uprisings against the rule of the communist party. Kronstadt sailors played major roles in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 and, in 1921, they revolted once again against what they saw as the betrayal of the revolution by the Bolshevik regime.

Today Kronstadt suffers from the public neglect that has been plaguing Russia since perestroika. The approach to Kronstadt is notable for the long drive past expensive dachas of the rich, high-walled and bristling the CCTV cameras. The great highway along the tidal barrier that was begun in the late 1980s stands unfinished, falling into ruins. Once on the island the naval installations and buildings are crumbling, paint is peeling. But with the 2003 tercentennial of St Petersburg this is beginning to change: the central market (*gostiny dvor*) is being renovated and new national funds are being granted to restore Kronstadt. It is easy to see how magnificent the town was in its heyday: the anchor motif appears everywhere, richly decorating fences, gates, towers and buildings. The crumbling palaces and the gorgeous cathedral still have the power to impress the visitor. And the town is still full of young naval recruits in their distinctive, timeless costume.

The project was organised by St Petersburg artist/curator Oleg Yanushevsky, together with Gillian McIver of Luna Nera, in conjunction with the Centre for Contemporary Art St Petersburg.

The area available for the exhibition *Slovo Khudozhnika/ Word of the Artist* was located on the canal in the central area of Kronstadt named the Admiralty. Nearby is the grandiose Naval Cathedral as well as many docks, pools and basins which lead to the harbour. The artists were given two buildings: the Residence, a former official's house, and a derelict former naval storehouse contiguous to the Residence, which was the main site for the exhibition.



installation "a history in 6 volumes"



installation "sails"





video "Mosti"



Inside the Residence, the sparse wood panelled rooms housed two related text-based installations. "Sails" was an installation of texts from old books (English, Russian and German) on European history and philosophy, focused on the Enlightenment, Napoleonic and Imperial eras.

Deconstructed, the pages formed hanging sails which wafted in the summer breeze through open windows in the old house. The now-empty book covers became the second installation, "A history in six volumes." The installations created or provoked alternative readings of the meta-history of the past. The books chosen date from specific eras and deal with deliberately chosen themes: empire, naval power and nation building. Today the books - the most recent date from 1949 - can be read as "propaganda" but this brings up the issue of whether today's "truth" may be tomorrow's "propaganda". On the other hand, the materials that replace the pages of some of the volumes - elemental substances such as bread, salt, wood and earth - are the timeless realities from which "history" is made.

In "Bridges of St Petersburg," which was projected on the rough bare wall of the storehouse, she went on to deal with another almost archetypal substance: the body of water that surrounds and creates the city: the rivers Moyka, Fontanka and Neva, and the web of canals. The everpresent consciousness of water is counterpointed by the mechanistic rhythms of the thirteen great bridges on the Neva, which open and close nightly to allow access to the sea. Installed in the storehouse, the film "Bridges of St Petersburg" was an environmental montage loop that mixed classic film footage with present material, fusing past and present representation of key emblems of St Petersburg.