

# KUNSTforum

## Zeitgeist

Pavel Borisov - 09.10.2015 - English, Kritik

While “Okkupert” hits the TV-screens, Russian and Norwegian artists organized a big group show at the territory of a former NATO base nearby Tromsø, thus testing a potential of artistic gentrification and international collaboration in High North.



Vengsøy ferry. Photo: David González

*Nothing will grow together because nothing belongs together* is an exhibition project organized by the young curatorial duo Kurant (Camilla Fagerli and Maria Danielsen) from Tromsø, with Russian co-curators Ekaterina Golubina and Natalia Smolyanskaya. Located at Olavsvern naval base, a 25,000 square meter facility nearby Tromsø, the project includes 14 Russian and Norway-based artists.

The title refers to Billy Brandt’s saying *Now what belongs together will grow together* allegedly dropped in 1989 when the demolition of the Berlin Wall started. Brandt was the mayor of Berlin at the time and didn’t say the exact phrase; rather it was attributed to him by journalists. Events of such scale require catch phrases so that it stays in people’s memory long after they’re gone; Brandt in a way served as the zeitgeist’s medium. The spirit of

the time affects people and it prevails over individuals. The question is to what extent we are able to transgress given conditions, not so much in the sense of social norms but in the sense of questioning and probing our attachments to a historical time and the meanings it dictates.

The historical background of Olavsvern base poses the same problem: What can be done with the strong implications in this particular space; is there a chance to break through its semantic and spatial pressure? Particularly, what can an artistic freedom do in such strict settings?

According to the online statement, the opposition of freedom and control is something that the curators took as a starting point for the project. Now, when the post-cold war euphoria has gone, the exhibition title sounds more like a diagnosis rather than a futuristic scenario. Although the profound dissociation of things presented in the title is working against the idea of collaboration, an attempt to find a dialogue in a separated world sets up an interesting dilemma for the project that has to oscillate between these two extremes.

It was hard to decide beforehand whether the project would serve as a commentary on the recent situation or try to avoid direct interpretations, resting upon advantages of mediate artistic practices. One way or another, this Russian-Norwegian exhibition dedicated to the subjects of freedom and control held at former NATO naval base, recently bought by Russian investors for vague reasons, could hardly avoid persistent contextual readings. Let alone the growing political tension and mutual economic sanctions between Russia and the West, as well as an accelerating competition for the future of the Arctic, where Tromsø holds a specific position as the biggest Norwegian town up North.



Installation view: Alexander Lysov's light installation and Emilija Skarnulytes video No Place Rising. Photo: David González

## The Mermaid's Gaze

Because of the base's enormous size it's no wonder that the prevailing medium at the exhibition is installations in one form or the other – whether it's video, sound, light or simply accumulations of objects – mediums that allows the use different strategies in relation to spatial organization and orientation. The space can be divided into two parts following the base's structure, and the first group of works is installed in the dock and a side tunnel.

Emilija Skarnulyte's video projection measuring several meters high, depicts a mermaid in a mask exploring the waters of Olavsvern dock. The slow, haunting video recalls a scene from Cameron's "The Abyss" in which extra-terrestrials are using liquid tentacles to communicate with the scientists at the underwater platform. The mermaid at the video is observing the place, willing to intrude its secrecy, just like the exhibition visitors intrude the space of a former secret base.

One needs time to recognize the light running through the dock's space as an art work, an installation made by Alexander Lysov. When standing on the small bridge over the dock, the light combined with the sonar sound runs towards you as if on a highway, except you're not moving anywhere. The more one is standing alone on this bridge, the more perceptual the illusion grows, and moves the viewer away from the dock's predominant functionality.



Hanna Zubkova and Ekaterina Vasilyeva's opening performance. Photo: David González

On the opposite side of the dock, a black vertical cloth is mounted. The work by Hanna Zubkova and Ekaterina Vasilyeva serves as a screen for a projection of slowly moving hands passing a glass. At the opening the exact same performance took place with artists passing a glass of water to each other. My attention was captured by the moving yellow hands on the background cloth and the blackness of this big stripe, where its reflection in the

water is a kind of a column, seemingly supporting the dock's vault.

Right next to the dock is Dmitriy Fillipov's bilingual double video based on interviews, and next to it is Ellen Ringstad's installation made of wooden constructions in the room glowing with red light. Fillipov's piece is one of the two works that emphasizes the international features of the project in a direct manner – a Russian character is speaking from the one screen, a Norwegian from the other.

The only route to the next group of art works is through a bright tunnel. While moving on, the crescent sound of soft singing in Russian directs you. Anne Schefer and Ilmira Bolotyan's singing performance suffered changes as one of the singers fell ill. However, one couldn't see who was singing as the sound came from loudspeakers. This soft transition from a huge open space works perfectly with the quiet and ambient works in the dock. Closer to the tunnel's entry a deep bass begins to distract this unity and one enters a completely different situation.



Ilmira Bolotyan and Anna Schefer's performance *Vulnerable Singing* within Ellen Ringstad's *The Wind Failed To Follow The Predictions*. Photo: David González

### **Nothing Belongs Together**

This next part of the base consists of a long tunnel that runs parallel to the dock. With rows of hangar-like spaces and smaller rooms at the side, its structure is quite similar to a room-to-room logic of an average museum. Such a space reinforces a sense of separation and autonomy in the rest of the exhibition wherein each artist got an individual space to present their work in the forms of performance, video, sculpture, installation, printouts, sound – different media that intensify diversity. This part is mainly about dissociation.

Deep bass comes from *Torpedo Night Club*, a travesty performance by Kirsten Astrup who subverses an idea of

authority in a playful manner. In several ways this work dominates the exhibition — screaming posters, dressed up people who embodies authority representatives walk all over the base, loud music overlaps Ørjan Amundsen's sound piece, the sense of celebration which goes against restraint of the other works, and its location right in the middle of the exhibition route.

After first entering the club-like hall with music and strobe lights, the viewers are allowed to enter the next room where those who came earlier are standing in line, trying to get into the last room. Not surprisingly, the last room is merely a chill out zone and the idiocy of restrictions became a part of the game.

Ellen Ringstad employs three rooms that on Olavsvern's floor plan form a symbolic triangle. This motif is repeated in different variations – a drawing on a paper, a minimalist sculpture, a pattern on the ceiling. One room is filled with different found objects, tellies, scratched photos, junk box, fish tank, a printed quote from T.S. Eliot. Something's clicking, flickering, staring at you from the television screen, and it feels as if the room has been urgently abandoned. Right next to the room there's a crane in a small grotto – the projection consisting of blurred images of control panel schemes is moving on the wall, and in the twilight space, it looks like a big sculpture covered with mesmerizing images.



Henrik Plenge Jacobsen, Sanatorium, detail. Photo: David González

Hanging from the ceiling is three cast sculptures, a plasma-video with changing letters composing word "Zauberberg", and a wall covered with foil stripes of three colours forming something like a flag. Henrik Plenge Jacobsen's work is a well-organized space that invites for meditation, but without any hints or tips, the symbolic casts and cryptic words leaves the viewer with only associations and guesses.

Later someone said that there is a hardly visible description on the wall made by the artist and that the work refers to 'The Magic Mountain' by Thomas Mann. This only proves the exhibition's rule – without little hints works stay riddles.

Just like in Ringstad's control room, the same thought-out negligence dominates Ekaterina Golubina's installation. At the entry there's a chair on a platform coloured with silver paint. The space is filled with different metal lockers, broken wooden constructions, plastic bottles, rugs, and several photographs with military trucks patched with paint are thrown on the constructions. There's also glossy decorated gas masks and a lap-top showing a catwalk fails video. In the ceiling there is a paper sculpture in the form of an atomic mushroom, under it a table with cosy benches. At the opening visitors were offered mushroom-shaped cookies. The whole scenario comes off as a grandma's chest full of amusing things and dusty dreams, but who's got the key?

Per Martinsen has filled half of his space with printouts found online that refer to politics, economy, markets, private correspondence. A table with a lap-top and a camera placed in the middle of the space puts anyone standing in front of it under surveillance. The background sound makes the situation inconvenient for reading, and if there's an important message hidden in this pile of information it is buried under the amount of it. The whole thing looks like a damnation of the information age.



Ekaterina Golubina, No Title. Photo: David González

Aside from a sound piece audible through loudspeakers in several of the spaces, Ørjan Amundsen also installed a TV-collage video in one of the passages. Effortlessly placed in the corner on the floor, the video's voice-over mashes pop lyrics with some urgent revelations, stuck somewhere between sincerity and jeer.

Another of Ellen Ringstad's installations is on occasion combined with a singing performance. But most of the time the room is empty, containing only a shop trolley with brooms and a metal railing about one meter high on the walls, vaguely forming a triangle that creates an image of a road going over horizon when observed from the entrance. Strangely enough this is the most elegant work in how it completely holds a large space together by minimal means.

Next is a pitch-dark room and on the opposite side of it, behind the doorway, is Emilija Skarnulyte's video projection depicting battle action. A couple of thin red light streams are supposed to mark a threshold in the middle of the room from where the work should be observed. However, most of the viewers go directly to the doorway as the red lines are almost invisible, thus spoiling the initial idea of observing the video from a distance and the need to move sideways in order to grasp whole picture. It is difficult to recognize the Soviet uniform from WWII that in combination with the slow motion digital video clearly shows that this footage of a historical re-enactment actually has been taken recently.

The last room is a cubic construction within a small grotto separated from the tunnel by the wall, a work by Tanya Busse. There are two ways to get there – through a curtain or around a construction by the narrow passage. Someone suggested to go around. The passage to the work is paved with gravel and bathed in shimmering light, trimmed trunks are leaning on the construction as if they are holding a heavy rock arch. Inside the concrete cube an arboreal smell comes from a can of boiling water with tree branches thrown in it. A video projection depicts mining machinery and the subtitles tell how one can create a spell against these machines. The simple oppositions of organic and non-organic, magical and mechanical surprisingly make a really subtle work in such severe environment.

This installation marks the end of the exhibition's route as Jay Hawkins' hysterically screams in the video's last minute "I put a spell on you".



Per Martinsen, *The Fear Machine*. Photo: David González

### **“The Trouble With You Is That You Want A Simple Answer”**

This flickering inscription on the screen of the telly that is part of Ellin Ringstad’s work may be applied to many of the art works in the exhibition. Not that the statement itself is a big deal. But when the written word is considered as a control tool and abandoned in favour of a visual and audial experience that provides the spectator with a more unrestricted attitude towards an initial idea of the exhibition, any written statement appears more distinct in such surroundings.

For the sake of the narrative and in order to give credits to all artists involved, I used references to all art works taken from elsewhere; information that a regular visitor to *Nothing will grow together* has been deprived of. The curatorial decision to avoid any explanatory materials as well as labels with artist’s names and work’s titles was confusing. A few lucky ones had an opportunity to listen to first-hand commentaries from the artists or curators. For the rest, intuition became the only means of orientation. Emotional response to an art works is a primary thing, but for those who have no artistic background or simply trying to conceptualize this exhibition experience, there’s not much help.

The size of the base makes it equal to a big metropolitan exhibition venue. Without a map or a guide, a minimum two hours walk is required to see up to 20 big works, which is rather disorienting. The anonymity at the exhibition poses a simple problem of inability to make references besides using simple descriptions. What looks like an attempt to give a spectator complete freedom of orientation in project’s space, leaves one afterwards with a feeling of confusion and poses more questions than giving insights into curatorial and artistic intentions. How would the project suffer from attributing works and explaining exhibition’s structure, not to mention the idea?



On the other hand, if anonymity was the main point and artist's national identities were abandoned for the sake of a collective result, why mark certain works with artists' self-presence, which obviously went against the convention, giving credits to some over the others? Why emphasize that this is a Russian-Norwegian project at all if this was the less articulated idea at the exhibition?



Kirsten Astrup, *Night Club Torpedo*, performance. Photo: David González

I don't know whether the concept of *Nothing will grow together* has connections to a growing interest in the Nordic art scene to a so called object-oriented ontology and affiliated art, where things are allowed to speak for themselves. If yes, then it would be fair enough to abandon any conceptual descriptions – if an art object speaks for itself, who needs explanations? Presumably, in such conditions socio-cultural commentaries that are coming from an artist, as well as any attempt to impose certain interpretation, may be considered as out-dated, too biased and authoritative.

*Nothing will grow together because nothing belongs together* is a bold and significant attempt in some respects. As far as I know, it is the first art project of such scale in Tromsø presenting a Russian-Norwegian group show with even number of participants from both sides. Organized by young curators and artists in their thirties who grew up in a time when relations between our countries became more open. Thus they haven't been affected by cold war paranoia and stereotypes, the fact that opens up space for daring statements about directions these relations can go on artistic, more individual basis. Unfortunately, an opportunity that the project as a whole failed to grasp or, perhaps, discarded as irrelevant because *things that do not belong together will not grow together* anyway.