

## **Between State and Public: "What's the Time in Vyborg?", a Project by Liisa Roberts**

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*B.M. - Have you noticed, at this Manifesta, the rise of some new tendencies in European art?*

*I.B. - Maybe today we can speak about the objectification of art. Artists want to make artworks again. The thing that was important for the middle of the 90s, art activism, is today taking a back seat. Activism resists being recorded. What remains after it? Documentation? This is why today we can again see an interest in a work of art, an object. This certainly concerns video as well, of which there is plenty at the exhibition.*

From the interview of Bogdan Mamonov with Iara Bubnova, curator of the Manifesta, International Biennale of arts in Frankfurt-on-Main, 2002. In: pH. #1. Kaliningrad, Center of Contemporary Art, 2003.

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**The main challenge for me is to try to create a form in which a film or a document, for instance, is not a readymade frame into which one might fit a narrative or an image. Rather - in the process of creating its own image, and at each stage of its process - it is a potential framework for future action. This form would be one that is both happening and being documented at the same time.**

Liisa Roberts. Artist questionnaire: 21 Responses: Roberts. In: October. MIT Press, Spring 2002. P.50.

"Disappearance of space" - perhaps this is how one can define psychological effect from art exhibitions in globalization era and what ultimately explains the major flaw of globalization that was insightfully characterized by Paul Virilio as the end of the engine era<sup>1</sup>.

Kim Levine, an art critic, formulated the similar phenomena as "power vacuum" in relation to the last Venice Biennale. The main consequence of this powerlessness and engineless is the absence of

a point of return in the long circular races of art enterprises of a global scale. The big art project becomes that "floating machine" which gets rid of all signs of engine and simulates its own debris like a submarine which throws out false wreckages and fuel in order to flee from its chasers while anticipating its own disappearance.

Today many institutions of contemporary art that operate on the global level, including those of the famous international Biennales, can be compared to that strategic submarine which has no point of destination, their content and goal are motivated by the right to control an imaginary territory of contemporary art before their recurrent disappearance.

Indeed, who can now recall the particular reason why Venice became a site for the major event for the world art except of its role to be one of the main tourist attractions? And what the connections to local communities do the big institutions like Guggenheim in Bilbao, or Beacon Dia Center, recently opened in the depressed industrial town in the New York state, construct? Their localization is as arbitrary and inexplicable as a sudden tornado or alien spaceship descended in the empty field.

Researchers, navigators and passengers - curators, institutions, dealers and viewers - in search of unknown territories constantly face the trouble of inventions of new routes to realize absolute, infinite, circular voyages as their navigations do not presuppose any point of departure or destination but only mean symbolic exploration of the territory of contemporary art.

Inside of this situation, individual artists' projects noticeably compensate the lack in articulate narratives of location and suggest their own models of project-institution producing such narratives and unfolding them in zones of conflicts, or places with ambiguous identity of borderline territory.

Moreover, the search for a location, which can at once suggest both the parameters and content for future projects, has became one of the most important tendencies of the current moment. It gets a distinct forms in the projects of net and media art which make a lot of efforts, while operating in the digital domain, to find virtual "zones" in

the physical reality as well as the possibilities to use communication technologies for the purposes of describing and researching identities of the concrete territories<sup>2</sup> .

But that works of art that undertake this search within traditional visual arts and modes of exhibiting inevitably get under the fire of criticism which tends to accuse them in the absence of conventional representational models.

Last summer, I had a fortune to get involved in the events of the project initiated and directed by Finnish American artist Liisa Roberts. The project entitled "Vyborg: a Town Library in Viipuri" (2000) including the workshop "What's the Time in Vyborg" (started in 2001) took place in the small Russian city of Vyborg, on the border of Finland and Russia.

Robert's program for the summer events in Vyborg consisted of a series of theatrical tours around the city prepared by a group of teenagers, local residents and recent high school graduates. The tours were the climax of the long-lasting collaboration of Liisa and her colleagues with the young Vyborg residents to create a narrative scenario of Vyborg out of the discussions and actions, which Liisa had been initiating in the city for the past three years.

A main motivation for this project was, from the one hand, Robert's desire to explore how the city of Vyborg, which several times, throughout its long history, underwent re-identification within the territories of Finland and Russia, and the last time - after its annexation by the USSR from Finland in 1944 - is perceived by its residents, and first of all, by its young generation; from another hand, how the individual perception of a place is different from the ideological canons and codes inscribed in city's architecture, which in turn serves as a container for a "memory of nations."

The task of Roberts' team thus became the opposite to a museological image of the city: it was the research of the identity of Vyborg in its present time and creation of appropriate forms of its presentation. From the beginning, Roberts' project implied far more than merely the tours around the city. It is a social experimentation of the artist who has always been engaged with the problems of

perception, psycho-physiological and humanitarian aspects of image-making. Her early works have often taken the form of films that explore images in relation to the perception of viewers, often linking real-time with the time of representation by exploring possibilities of the production and projections of images.

These types of investigations have led Roberts to reflections of the time of a work of art, on the gap between artist's idea of how work should function and its perception by public, on the pre-existence of images in the collective memory, and ultimately, on the narrative tendencies that form the present time of an art work.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, according to Roberts' initial plan, the result of the actions in Vyborg was to be a film as the best realization of her concept of the time of an artwork, which implied simultaneity of event and its fixation that a certain mode of filmmaking carries out.

However, immediately after the arrival in Vyborg in the end of 2000, Roberts, thinking of a possible visual project, immersed herself in the current debates on the new restoration plan of the public library built by Alvar Aalto in Vyborg in the 1930s as a manifestation of global modernism in the newly independent state of Finland.

The restoration of the library, which was during the Second World War deprived of all its functions and details of Aalto's design, began in 1955 by the Soviet architects and continues until now under the auspices of The Finnish Committee for the Restoration of Viipuri Library (Viipuri is the Finnish name of the city).

Roberts stood for the inclusion of the Soviet period of the library history, which had been at the moment totally ignored by the Finnish restoration plan. Her argument was that the Soviet design of the 50s should have been reconsidered as an important stage in studies of Aalto's library because the library is connected with the history of Vyborg as much (if not more) as to that of Western Modernism.

Such discussions became a form of Roberts' participation in architectural symposiums and meetings organized by the Finnish Restoration Committee that is a rare example of artistic intervention in a zone between the state power and public sphere in discussions

around the civil architecture in Russia<sup>4</sup> .

Besides her ongoing discussion with the Finnish architects, Roberts had directed for two years a creative writing workshop organized for Vyborg schoolchildren in the auditorium of Aalto's library. For this workshop, she invited professionals from different fields such as journalists, architecture students, a poet, theatre director and artist to participate while collaborating very closely on its initial implementation with Olga Maslova, a psychologist from St.- Petersburg, and Edgaras Platelis, a young translator from Vilnius. Together this group improvised with the teenagers the creation of narrative scenario revealing their feelings and experiences in relation to the town.

The workshop's location - the auditorium of Aalto's library - was deliberately chosen: according to Aalto's idea for the design of this room: its architecture, the undulated ceiling and large windows symbolized the democratic changes in the newly independent Finland. The undulated ceiling was designed for an even democratic sound throughout the space, while the large window provided a panoramic view of the main square of the city, bringing this live urban space into the archival time of the library.

At the inception of "What's the Time in Vyborg?", contemporary reconstruction was also beginning in this space. Children, when expressing their relation to Vyborg through writing in the workshops (in which Russian Poet Aleksey Parshikov, also played a catalytic important role) used the architecture of the auditorium as a point of departure in their reflections<sup>5</sup> .

Thus the collective reflections upon forms of time, in which the city exists, turned out to be a foundation for Roberts' project, expanding her initial plan to make a film to the variety of actions in the city. Since then, the production of film was no longer considered as a forming process but became one of the project's consequent parts.

Roberts virtually shifted in her work from discussion on forms of visualization to the stream of discussions, communication and live events, with not so much concern how aesthetically correct these events will suit to the conventions of the contemporary practice of

installations and well-documented projects of art activism.

In other words, the issues raised by the work in Vyborg have little to do with the issues of visualizations although the actions provoked by Roberts are aimed at the semantic codes inscribed in city's architecture and its aesthetic appearances. Rather, in her objectless and open-ended work, each event - organized by herself, children of Vyborg, or Finnish architects - became parts of the continuous narrative in which one action and its result provides a possibility for another.

One of the core moments of Robert's intervention in architectural debates in Vyborg was a tour guided by Alexander Shver - one of the main figures who conducted the post-war Soviet restoration of Aalto's library - for the Finnish Committee of the Restoration of Viipuri library.

Shver, who basically saved the most of original Aalto's design in his restoration, told in details on his work in the 50s as well as on his memory about the library's general appearance at the moment when he moved to Vyborg from Leningrad in 1957 and began to conduct the restoration. After this excursion significant changes occurred in the ideology of the Finnish architectural plan, having the Soviet period of Aalto library's history included in the publication "PTAH" (a theoretical resource of the Alvar Aalto Academy).

The final achievement of this artistic intervention was an agreement between Roberts and the architects, which implied the removal of the stage built in the Soviet time in library's auditorium that would allow freeing more space in the room designed "for public debates" for the variety of events like, for example, screening films.

Roberts' work in Vyborg has an extraordinary ability to address within the time of the project different temporalities of a territory; these temporalities do overlap, but not necessarily coincide, with what we often understand by the present time of location. Here, it is necessary to focus on the understanding of time for which Roberts argues in her reflections on the current identity of Vyborg. This understanding obviously excludes the division into the present, past and future, but rather, applies the Deleuzian point about the fusion of "soft" form of the completed past with the "solid" of the current present.<sup>6</sup>

"Softness" can be seen in remembrance and nostalgia of the elder Finns for whom Vyborg is still a Finnish city Viipuri whose role as a cultural capital of independent Finland was formed between 1917 and 1939 - the time before the annexation, when the Modernist project of the Viipuri Library by Aalto came to symbolize the idea of national strengthened national identity in an international context.

In the contemporary context of Vyborg, this sentiment is no longer effective, nevertheless it does not cease to exist and is present in the collective memory of Finns, regularly undertaking their sentimental trip across the border to revisit their lost territory and the memories. For the Finnish consciousness (regardless of age), the past of Vyborg does not express distance and completeness, but rather it transfers to the present, which in turn plays a role of past here, expressing the withdrawal from all of the existential contents, and first of all, from the real existence of Vyborg itself. Indeed, Vyborg as an object disappears from those nostalgic discussions.

To the Russian "solid present", Roberts' work in Vyborg is important with its intention to take a location as a discursive space, which in the ideological and post-ideological reality of Russia was completely compromised, if not destroyed. From another hand, this is an attempt to localize discourse on time in parameters of one single territory and explore what makes geographical place to become a *location* in totality of all aspects of its historical past and present as well as people's subjectivity. In other words, to return the discussions on time their object.

Actualization of the concept of location introduced by "What's the Time in Vyborg?" is especially important today, when the idea of "global city" gets compromised as it annuls different levels and forms of collective consciousness and memory within one single global narrative.

A value of separate territories in this narrative is reduced to a price defined by their ratings on global market and established in accordance to fetishized geography of the commercial projects as well as ruling ideologies. In Russia, one of such projects was a celebration of the 300-anniversary of St. Petersburg (not accidentally,

the events in Vyborg organized by Roberts coincided with the last summer festivities in St. Petersburg as well as with festivities of Vyborg's 600 years celebrations), which revealed a blatant incongruity of the state imperial attitude with the actual feelings of St. Petersburg residents who mostly chose to temporally migrate to the countryside during the major city's events.

Hence, post-Soviet contempt for historicity of places, in Vyborg expressed through a complete abandonment of the unique medieval city's center and most of its old streets and courtyards, from one hand, and Finnish nostalgia, from another - in a dialogue with these two parallel, constantly overlapping forms of consciousness Roberts realizes her "search" of the present time and a vector which will eventually lead to recognition of the future.

The goal imposed by Liisa Roberts and her young collaborators (Dina Grigorieva, Yana Klichuk, Liuba Mukhorova, Yulia Popova, Olga Fedotova, and Ania Yaskina) in their tours was to make - with the help of the characters created in the writing workshop in whose roles the girls decided to explore the city - connections between the different codes and time zones, previously unrecognized in city's landscape.

At first glance, the girls' performances in Vyborg recalled Situationist projects of the late 50s, with their focus on performance as a way to get an actual experience in a city. But the tours in Vyborg are different from their Situationist predecessors, far from the intention to construct "situations" - a sort of universal formulas of behavior meant to help to recognize the models of the future social life - as well as the practice of "drift, " the route of which was oriented to the jungles of a standard industrial city.

To the Situationist belief in a general formula to be used in the creation of any location by request, young Vyborg guides preferred the subjectivity of those who are involved in game, and focus on the history and peculiarities of the city's mythology.

Roberts' project does not leave any doubts in consistency of her exploration of the new genre which can hardly be defined in terms of a visual project, but rather as building a parallel reality - disruptive,

interpretational, playful - which unfolds as a permanent exchange and dialogue within (and with) the existing one.

Nevertheless, Liisa Roberts has been invited to participate in a number of international exhibitions and one of them is "Faster than History" which will be open in the museum Kiasma - Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, in January 2004. A transfer of Vyborg project to the representational context of an exhibition (whose focus is on the myth of "fast development" with its acceleration of the concept of future in discussions about social history of so-called "peripheral" zones of Europe in the last 15 years) - undoubtedly an experiment which will create a possibility to continue those debates and the process of manufacturing of the counter-image of Vyborg on the Finnish territory, in close juxtaposition of its "real" time with the imagined one, carried by the Finnish consciousness.

The success of this project in Finland will definitely depend on the way how Finnish organizers understand that the debates around the question "What's the Time in Vyborg?" lie in the dialectics of time of individual territory and common history (in the case of Vyborg, it is determined by two important events - building of Aalto's Viipuri library and post-war annexation of Vyborg by the USSR) - and how the archiving and documenting of the present in this dialectics constitute an event of the project.

## NOTES

- 1 This idea is expressed in the book: Paul Virilio. *Speed and Politics. An Essay on Dromology*. Foreign Agents Series. New York, Semiotext(e). 1986. P.40
- 2 For example, among the projects in the Eastern Europe, the Center for Information Culture was created in the abandoned space of the former military base in the Karosta, near to the city of Liepal, Lithuania (on the border between Lithuania, Belarus and Russia). In July 2003, the festival of net art took place there, during which artists explored the territory with the means of the net art.
- 3 One of the previous Liisa Roberts' work, *Sidewalk*, is reviewed in: Okwui Enwezor, "Phases of Monument: Liisa Roberts' Sidewalk" in *Parkett* 61, 2001. P.177-181.
- 4 For example, Liisa took part in the architectural seminar in Helsinki

dedicated to the reconstruction of Aalto library in 2003; the discussion with one of the members of the Finnish Restoration Committee was a form of her participation in the exhibition "Fundamentalisms of New Order", Sharlottenburg Center, Copenhagen, 2002. Roberts was invited to the seminar of critics, architects, and historians DOCOMOMO - Documentation of conservation of modernist buildings and urban projects - Vyborg, September, 2003.

- 5 These essays are published on the website:  
[www.auditorium.vbg.ru](http://www.auditorium.vbg.ru)
- 6 Gilles Deleuze. *Logic of Sense*, chapter "The Porcelain and Volcano".