

The Kilometre of Sculpture in Rakvere



An express-interview with exhibition's organizational team: Michael Haagensen, project leader; Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk from the Netherlands, curator; and Rebeka Põldsam, a local curator

Agnese Čivle, www.anothertravelguide.com
26/06/2014

Kilometre of Sculpture
Rakvere, Estonia
June 28 – July 13, 2014

The Kilometre of Sculpture (KoS) is an international, open-air art exhibition held in the public spaces of Rakvere, a city in northern Estonia. KoS has developed as part of the contemporary theatre festival “Baltoscandal” – a biannual fusion of experimental shows, performances and productions done in various genres that take place in numerous venues throughout Rakvere.

The approximately kilometre-long walking route will feature works by artists from the Baltic States and around the world. Situated on the hilly landscape of the castle's park grounds and the city's park, the exhibition will consist of two distinct parts – namely, one section containing works that have been assembled through an open-call process, and the other featuring works that have been selected by curators.

In an express-interview, Arterritory.com queried the exhibition's organizational team: Michael Haagensen, project leader; Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk from the Netherlands, curator; and Rebeka Põldsam, a local curator.

How and when did you get the idea for KoS?

Michael Haagensen: The idea for the Kilometre of Sculpture (KoS) originally came in response to two main problems that had been discussed in the media in Estonia for some years. First, the gulf that seemed to have emerged between the field of contemporary art and the general public, and secondly, the lack in Estonia of any major event specifically designed for artists working in three dimensions.

The idea for KoS came to me quite suddenly while walking in the hills of northern Karelia in Finland, in 2012. Having enjoyed open-air sculpture exhibitions elsewhere in the world (Australia, the Netherlands, Finland, the UK), I realized how effective they are at engaging with the general public, and since Estonia did not have such an event, it seemed an obvious way to help improve the image of contemporary art in Estonian society.

Then in December 2013, Olga Temnikova (Temnikova&Kasela Gallery) introduced me to one of the organisers of the Baltoscandal theatre festival. Baltoscandal attracts thousands of visitors from all over Europe every two years, and while there has always been plenty for these cultural tourists to do in the evenings, during the daytime they quickly run out of things to interest them. Baltoscandal had already been looking for some kind of complementary visual arts event for a couple of years, and it seemed that KoS was purpose-built for the task, and that Rakvere was ideal as a venue.

Could you please introduce the curatorial team behind KoS?

Michael Haagensen: This year, as in our first year, everything happened at lightning speed. It had to – we only met up with the organisers of Baltoscandal in December 2013, and we knew this was a project that would normally take 12–15 months to prepare, and we only had six. So, assembling the team took a matter of days. I sought advice from local art colleagues and based on that, and the fact that I had had some contact with Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk (NL) in connection with his curatorial work for the 2013 *fotokuu* (photomonth) exhibition, I was very pleased when he accepted my invitation to be our lead curator, with three young Estonian curators on his team. My original idea was that the locals would deal with the open call, while Niekolaas would curate the invited section, but quite quickly Niekolaas and his team adjusted this to suit their own preferred approach.

Read in archives: An interview with curator Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk

Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk: From our initial curatorial meetings, we decided it would be somewhat misleading to treat the artists from the open call and the selected artists differently; to create different mentionings and trajectories for both, whereas the outcome would be a single, open-air exhibition. And how could one start to distinguish these strains of thought – this separation – in an outdoor environment? And would that be productive as an exercise? Hence, we decided to declassify and disintegrate the structure and focus on the qualities of the work(s), and also to treat our curatorial operations equally, moving a bit beyond the dichotomy of local and international...

Tell us more about this mixed model involving a curated section and an open call in organizing KoS.

Michael Haagensen: Our original concept was to simply use an open call, but after discussions with key people in the visual arts in Estonia, we decided to adopt a mixed model. By that, I mean we used an open call to attract applications in response to a curatorial brief. After the curators have made their selection from the applicants, they then select and invite specific artists, both local and international, to complement the exhibition. So in the end, the two sources are used to produce a cohesive statement.

Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk: Furthermore, based on the curatorial brief that coincided with the open call, we selected proposals on their merit: we looked for proposed works that would be context-responsive and site-specific, rather than preconceived and already existing. In addition, the curatorial team has taken a keen interest in expanding the medium of sculpture, to further advance its potential shapes and configurations alongside parameters such as performativity, staging and acting out. In so doing, we wanted to overcome the common attributes of sculpture as passive and rigid lumps of material, residing comfortably in their selected places, and look for a more resonant and provocative engagement with surfaces and entities, equally in relation to the fabric of daily life in Rakvere and its natural environs.

Were there any other conditions that artists had to take into account when creating their work?

Michael Haagensen: This year there are two main considerations. Of course, the site-specific aspects of Rakvere in general and the various settings of the exhibition site, including the wild, exposed landscape of the castle park, the historical milieu of Pikk Street, and the more sedate decorum of the church park. Secondly, the curatorial note prepared by Niekolaas...

Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk: “...encompasses and reflects on the idea of theatre and its ramifications in its various categories and connotations. In other words, the aim of the Kilometre of Sculpture still is to establish direct and active linkages between theatre and sculpture, and vice versa: to expand sculpture into the space of both theatre and performance by deviating from the idea of a sculpture as, almost by definition, a solid and static object that is employed to give lasting form to matter. In so doing, the curatorial team takes a special interest in forms of sculpture that are thought of in terms of “the stage” and staged experience: exploring, through sculptural and performative possibilities, for instance, the materiality of the voice, sculpture as metaphor for the voice, staging the voice and the making of rhythm, performance as sculpture and sculpture as performance, and its possible hybrid objects (props, gestures, performing objects), and so forth.”

I suppose the process of finding the right places for the artwork along the walking route was one of the most complicated tasks. How did you deal with this?

Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk: In a way, somewhat metaphorically speaking, the exercise of placement is equal to designing a puzzle in which some of the elements are already present – here, I suppose the constitution of the landscape is most prominent – but the outline is only demarcated insofar as you can think and reach with the works at hand. This then becomes a subtle outbalancing of both proximity and distance: some works resonate well together, but then they start to dictate and influence the possible locations of other works. It is a process of shuffling and reshuffling, starting from scratch again, and so on, and so forth... In the end, the final position of the works has nothing to do with any preconfigured narrative or an “ABC-reading” that most any walking route might provide. In that sense, it is more “dérive” than “flâneur”.

Which well-known sculptors can we expect to see at KoS?

Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk: I suppose that depends on one’s preconceived knowledge about the arts, and sculptors specifically: who is well-known, less-known, and unknown. My natural response in this case would be: “None.” In my work as a curator, I rarely think about, nor consider this question, as for me the degree of visibility and general audience awareness an artist enjoys is not necessarily a qualitative measure in curating a potentially qualitative exhibition. I prefer to employ the notion of not-knowing as a device to trigger one’s curiosity for the things in the world.

Could you please mention up-and-coming Estonian sculptors we should pay attention to?

Rebeka Põldsam: Estonia is experiencing a quite a boom in sculpture and installation since Kirke Kangro and Taavi Talve have been in charge of Sculpture and Installation at the Estonian Academy of Arts. There are a number of artists who are already well-known in Estonia and also internationally: Edith Karlson, Jass Kaselaan, Mikk Madisson, Art Allmägi, Rene Reinumägi. Also Kris Lemsalu, Ivar Veermäe and Jaak Kaevats, who have mostly studied abroad and have a mixed background. From among the department’s current and previous students, a number of them are participating in KoS. Thus, there are a number of young installation and sculpture artists worth following.

How would you evaluate the opportunities for Estonian sculptors to show their art? How open to sculpture are institutions and the public space in Estonia?

Rebeka Põldsam: This is a difficult question and I think the artists should answer it. Basically, there are no venues that are ideal for large-scale installations. That’s why KoS is also a great opportunity. At the same time, the Young Sculpture Prize exhibition at Vaal gallery, which was used as an alternative space last year, offered room for really large-scale works.

In the case of smaller works, I would say installations are as common as any other media.

What kind of activities have you carried out to attract not only ordinary art lovers, but collectors and institutions as well?

Michael Haagenzen: Our focus this year is the artists and supporting them and their work in the exhibition. But of course, we will be inviting the directors of all the major museums and galleries and their staff to our opening event on 28 June. In addition, those galleries that represent our artists this year will also be encouraged to make their collectors and patrons aware of this opportunity to see contemporary sculpture in an extraordinary outdoor context.

Which other European events similar to KoS should we pay attention to?

Michael Haagenzen: There are a number of excellent outdoor exhibitions, but I guess those that are similar to KoS might include the exhibitions held by Wanås in Sweden, Sculpture by the Sea in Aarhus Denmark, Sculpture in Context in Dublin and, of course, your own Sculpture Quadrennial in Riga, to mention a few. Poland and Lithuania also have a number of important sculpture parks that provide a more permanent option for artists.

How would you characterize the common feeling and quality of the sculptural works that will be presented at KoS?

Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk: As constantly becoming, but never quite arriving. Or, in other words still, to go beyond the idea that sculpture is employed to give lasting form to matter, and instead, to think of sculpture as fleeting, in process, communicative and enabled to be responsive – let's think about the exhibition as a social assemblage, with provocative encounters and active engagements for and between viewers, works, environments, weather conditions, and the other objects and entities that become, consciously and unconsciously, part of a larger whole.

sculpture.ee