

LETTER FROM HELSINKI

Neighbours

There is a secret tunnel connecting the island of Suomenlinna, where I took part in a recent curatorial residency, to the mainland in Helsinki. Constructed by the military, it is said that the only way you can get to see it is by being evacuated after having a heart attack during the winter, when ice surrounds the island. This tunnel links to more than 200km of subterranean passageways beneath the city, designed as defence shelters for the entire, relatively small population. It is an apt metaphor for the complex history of this city, which now finds itself at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, acting as a hub for jets flying the short distance

over the North Pole to and from Japan, China and Korea. Finland is also strategically close to the Baltic countries, many of which feel equally threatened by the new cold war rhetoric issuing from Vladimir Putin's Russia, with which Finland shares a 1,300km border. During a bout of sabre rattling a couple of years back, Putin issued a barely veiled threat to Finland that should it join NATO, 'What do you think we will do in this situation? We moved our forces back, 1,500km away – will we keep our forces there? How they assure the safety and independence of their own country is the Finns' choice. Undoubtedly we appreciate Finland's neutral status ...' Finns near the border are said to still sleep with rifles under their beds. However, as well as being physically prepared for invasion, Finland also has become known as Europe's 'bear-whisperer'



IN AN UNUSUAL MOVE, THE PRIVATE FOUNDATIONS ARE ALSO SEEDING THE CURRENTLY UNDERDEVELOPED COMMERCIAL ART MARKET IN HELSINKI.

and the current centre-right Finnish president, Sauli Niinistö, has congratulated Putin not once but twice for his recent election victory and even questioned the Kremlin's involvement in the Skripal poisoning at a recent Brussels summit.

Finland's fortunes are increasingly connected to the Baltic states, particularly Estonia, from which come a number of increasingly prominent and influential artists. In the current exhibition 'There and Back Again' at the contemporary art museum Kiasma, Estonian artist Karel Koplímets exhibits a DIY boat constructed of 5,000 beer cans, which he sailed from Finland to Estonia. The cans, collected via social media, are mainly purchased by Finnish tourists on booze cruises to Tallinn. The artist's voyage represented a symbolic return of these cans by one Estonian worker. Finns go to Tallinn for cheap alcohol, while Estonians come to Finland for jobs and better pay. The exhibition also reflects the geographical position of Helsinki in being shown at a time 'characterised by the mobility of people, goods and work but also by political tensions between superpowers. The palpable backstory is the Soviet era with its restrictions, traumas and memories'. The closeness of Russia and the days of the Soviet Union cuts through this interesting and useful exhibition.

The number of prestigious museum spaces is increasing in the Helsinki and Espoo area, with the vast and wide-ranging EMMA in Espoo, now connected to Helsinki by a brand new metro system, which connects to all those tunnels and bomb-shelters. It's worth a trip, to see not only the large contemporary art collection but also the second-ever Futuro house built. This iconic mass-produced UFO-like transportable house (one was on the roof of Matt's Gallery in London in 2014) designed by Finnish inventor and architect Matti Suuronen, celebrates 50 years of its invention, about 50 examples of which are displayed here from all over the world. The new HAM (Helsinki Art Museum) also opened last year in the heart of downtown, resembling one of Helsinki's vast shopping malls and announcing itself to be an 'art museum the size of Helsinki', with mainstream blockbusters by Ai Weiwei and Gilbert & George. There will also be a new Helsinki Maritime Biennale in 2020. However,