

Finland



▲ Earning its stripes: EGS's 'Archipelago of Past and Future', one of the many works at the Biennial which are set outdoors along marked trails ▼ Alicja Kwade's 'Big Be-Hide' sculpture

Beat the rush to Vallisaari

It was a Russian base, then a torpedo store – and now it's a temporary home for modern art. Elise Morton visits the forgotten Helsinki island that's finally pulling in the punters

Fancy organising an international art event, during a global pandemic, on an abandoned island? This was the daunting task that fell to those behind the first Helsinki Biennial, a first-of-its-kind indoor/outdoor experience set on Vallisaari, a former military island in the picturesque Helsinki archipelago, bringing together contemporary artists from around the world. The result? An international extravaganza which – two months in – has outstripped even the expectations of its organisers, and simultaneously brought life and meaning back to a forgotten island with a chequered past.

Postponed in 2020, the Finnish capital's inaugural Biennial opened its doors on June 12 this year, and is now in the process of crescendoing into its final month. Its title, *The Same Sea*, is a reference to Vallisaari's history as a maritime fort, as well as the stretch of water which separates it from Finland's capital city, Helsinki, now considered one of Europe's trendiest, edgiest urban centres, and in stark contrast to Vallisaari island's incredible, wild – and, historically, shrouded – beauty.

Despite this, the island has proved a prime spot for an international art event, and a point of fascination in its own right. Less well-known than its sister isle, Suomenlinna, once Helsinki's main sea fort, Vallisaari's history one of intriguing extremes – from early 19th-century Russian base to Finnish torpedo store, thriving 1950s civilian community and, finally, abandoned outpost. Though it has been open to the public since 2016, strict controls intended to protect the island's ecosystem meant that even locals were unable to explore in much depth.

Until now. Opening up the island to international tourism, the Biennial has given this enticing little outcrop a new

lease of life – and a whole new appeal for swathes of art and nature-loving visitors – as well as those looking to venture into parts unknown. Around a third of the artworks are set outdoors along marked trails, with others housed inside gunpowder cellars and residential buildings, giving visitors a chance to engage not only with new works of art, but with the island's intriguing – and somewhat unnerving – past.

The effect is acute. When the ferry docks after the 20-minute sail from Helsinki, you're greeted by towering scaffolding. Finnish artist Jaakko Niemelä's *Quay 6* sounds a note of warning, rising to the height the Baltic Sea might reach if Greenland's northern ice sheet were to melt, while Alicja Kwade's 2019 sculpture *Big Be-Hide*, set on the strip connecting Vallisaari with neighbouring Kuninkaansaari, places two boulders – one real, one a metallic replica – either side of a mirror, an opposition between the natural and the man-made.

FOREST (for a thousand years...), meanwhile – an atmospheric sound installation by Canadian artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller – looks back, rather than forwards, portraying the sounds heard on Vallisaari throughout its history, juxtaposing birdsong with gunfire. Teemu Lehmusrusu's hybrid, solar-powered artwork *House of Polypores* (2021) goes one step further: it invites visitors to listen to the island itself, using mycotecture – made of mushrooms – to pick up changes in the trees, converting the sound of decaying wood into thunderous organ music.

Some artworks even concentrate on the island's now tenuous links to the modern world. Pawel Althamer collaborated with inmates from Suomenlinna open prison – who do maintenance work on Vallisaari – to shoot the part-VR and part-documentary film *Seven Pris-*



oners (2020). Other works engage with Vallisaari's former population, with oil landscapes, still lifes, and a self-portrait by army meteorologist Topi Kautonen adorning the walls of the "Pilot House", where he once lived.

But it's Sari Palosaari's *Eons and Instants* (2021) which chimes most acutely with the eerie remnants of military architecture that are being slowly swallowed by creeping greenery.

The installation sees rocks, from the island, loaded with a soundless crack-

ing agent which causes them to undergo a slow explosive process.

"The inner forces of the materials influence each other and autonomously transform the work," says Palosaari. "The concept of 'conserving nature's stage' is key. It sees the crust of the Earth as a 'rocky stage', one which offers habitats for diverse life."

But those keen to explore this particular rocky stage will have to be quick – once the Biennial ends on September 26, no trace of the artworks will remain on Vallisaari. Three will be placed in residential areas in Helsinki, however – including Kwade's works in Kalasatama – so if an abandoned island doesn't sound your cup of tea, you'll still have an excuse for an arty Finnish city break.

Helsinki Biennial runs to Sep 26; free entry. Ferries depart for Vallisaari from the Helsinki Biennial pavilion next to the Old Market Hall, Market Square, leaving every hour on the hour; tickets adults/children €8.49 (£7.28)/€4.25 (£3.64). Finnair, BA and Norwegian all fly direct from London to Helsinki.

Overseas travel is currently subject to restrictions. See page 2

AROUND EUROPE IN ART

ATHENS BIENNIAL Greece

This year's Biennial, ECLIPSE, aims to highlight artistic voices that have often been pushed to the periphery, with a particular focus on contemporary Black and queer narratives. Curated by Berlin-based collective Omsk Social Club and Ghanaian-American curator Larry Ossei-Mensah, the Biennale presents works by more than 80 artists across three historic venues. *September 24–November 28; one-day ticket adult/conc €10/€5 (£8.60/£4.30); three-day ticket adult/conc €18/€10 (£15.50/£8.60) (athensbiennale.org); Grecotel Pallas Athena offers rooms from £128 per night (grecotelpallasathena.com)*

HUMBOLDT FORUM Berlin, Germany

Berlin's newest museum is dedicated to non-European art. Located in the grand former Royal Palace, it is named in honour of the Prussian explorer Alexander von Humboldt and his older brother, Wilhelm, a lin-



guist and politician. The museum aims to spark debate and their current exhibition about ivory – *Terrible Beauty* – is sure to do just that. *Exhibitions free until November 13 (humboldtforum.org); Radisson Blu Hotel offers rooms from £143 per night (radissonhotels.com)*

MUNCH MUSEUM Oslo, Norway

One of the best-known images in art history, Edvard Munch's *The Scream* has been subject to controversy and conflict since it was unveiled in 1895. Opening on October 22, the first museum dedicated to Munch in his native Norway will explore that tumultuous history as well as his life and times. *Entry free for under-19s, £5 adults and students (munchmuseet.no); Scandic Vulkan offers rooms from £111 per night (scandichotels.com)*

GES-2 Moscow, Russia

The Russian capital now has a humming arts and music scene, and nothing illustrates this renaissance better than this vast – and vastly ambitious – sustainable arts centre recently opened a short stroll from the Kremlin. Housed in a former power station, the sprawling 20,000sq m site hosts an amphitheatre, an education centre and artist residences, as well as exhibitions and performances. *Free entry (v-a-c.org/en/ges-2); Otel' Russo-Balt offers rooms from £346 per night (russo-balhotel.com)*

CHARLES DICKENS FESTIVAL Deventer, Netherlands

What the Dickens does Charles Dickens have to do with the Netherlands? Not much, if we are honest. But that doesn't stop the good folk of Deventer celebrating his work in endearing bonkers style. Over one winter weekend, the medieval city bustles with more than 950 characters from his novels (right), while Christmas lights and a market twinkle. *December 11–12, free entry (dickensfestijn.nl); Huis Vermeer offers rooms from £101 per night (hotelhuisvermeer.nl)*

I-FEST INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL Castrovillari, Italy

Missed out on the Venice Film Festival? i-Fest is an excellent second chance to soak up some cinema in picturesque surroundings. Launched last year, it stresses innovation and up-and-coming Italian and international filmmakers. You might just catch the next Fellini or Almodóvar before they hit the big time. *September 9–12 (i-fest.it); Hotel Jolly offers rooms from £77 per night (hoteljollycastrovillari.it/index.html)*

INTERNATIONAL PUPPET THEATRE FESTIVAL Zagreb, Croatia

This offbeat festival, running since 1968, is a family-friendly chance to experience the Balkan state's fascinating capital. Croatian and international troupes take over the streets, and there are workshops on puppet-making and animation for hands-on fun. *September 17–23; most performances free (pif.hr); Esplanade Zagreb Hotel offers rooms from £105 per night (esplanade.hr)*

CASA ANA WRITING RETREAT Grenada, Spain

There are as many writing retreats as there are wannabe novelists, but this one is in a league of its own. Set in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, retreats are coached by writers including Forward Prize-nominee Mary-Jane Holmes and novelist Amanda Saint. Even if you don't manage to write the next *Wolf Hall*, the fine food and blissful atmosphere more than compensate. *Places available November 13–27 and November 27–December 11; one week from £813, two weeks from £1,367, including full B&B (casa-ana.com)*

ARTISTS' RETREAT Tuscany, Italy

Aspiring artist, not earnest scribbler? Then this 10-day retreat on a Tuscan estate could be the ticket. Days are spent sketching and painting, or getting inspiration from the Uffizi in nearby Florence. All produce is sourced from the estate and evenings are spent al fresco with a glass of wine, discussing artistic technique – or simply admiring the stars. *Places available for October 13–22; £3,942 for full board based on two sharing (workshopsinfrance.com/artists-retreat-italy)*

HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN MUSEUM Odense, Denmark

This new museum celebrates the genius behind *The Little Mermaid*, *The Ugly Duckling* and other fairy tales in the house where he lived. The grounds have been transformed into a maze-like fantasia of winding hedges and glass exhibition spaces. *Entry is free for under-17s, £19 for adults; with 50 per cent off until September 30 (hcandersenshus.dk); Danhostel Odense City offers rooms from £36 per night (danhostel.dk)*

Alex Diggins

Overseas travel is currently subject to restrictions. See page 2



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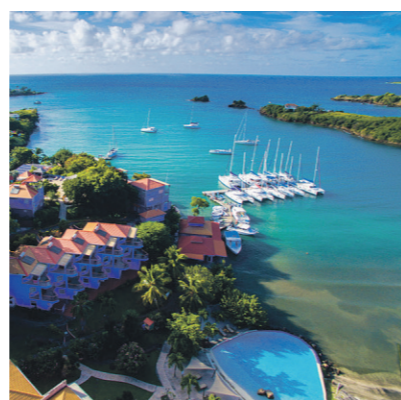
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