

Postcards from the Edge: Territorial Sacrifice and Care in Eastern Estonia

Francisco Martínez and Marika Agu

Greetings from Another Time

What if the landscapes that used to give you a sense of belonging have already been sacrificed to modernization, to the point of making many of them unrecognizable? This essay details a multi-source art installation based on archival postcards at the Contemporary Art Museum of Estonia (EKKM) which interrogates questions of belonging, pollution and modernization in the context of eastern Estonia. By exploring the side-effects of modern infrastructures, we also consider the nature of postcards as archival documents and as visual and material culture, in addition to their transformation into ethnographic devices through their display in a contemporary art installation.

In 2019, we prepared an installation for the exhibition “When You Say We Belong to the Light We Belong to the Thunder,” curated by Heidi Ballet.¹ Based on archival research, site explorations and practices of contemporary archaeology, we gathered a series of postcards from the early twentieth century that show recognizable landscapes which no longer exist – lost through a combination of intensive human activity and

Our installation considered these events and processes by placing old postcards from Narva, Sillamäe, Kohtla-Järve and Kiviõli in dialogue with the remains left at these sites. Alongside the postcards, we also exhibited modern debris, consisting of objects such as pollution samplers, broken bricks, rotten wood, promotional flyers, security tape aimed at preventing trespassing, borderland rubbish, and detritus such as apples and seashells.

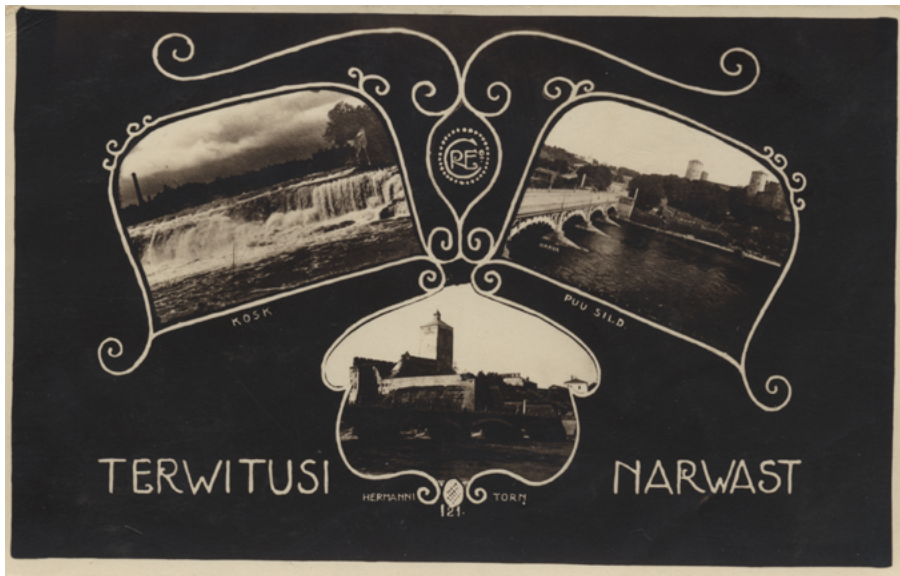
In a vitrine, we positioned the postcards in dialogue with actual remains and documentation from these sites, thus combining visual elements with material culture and political critique. The project also reflected on the nature of postcards as image-objects: they have a particular ontological capacity through their participation in how people imagine the world and with their power to index representations by the very act of selecting certain landscapes and views and putting them into wide circulation.

These postcards were not simply related to tourism; they had been carefully preserved in the Estonian National Library archive, taken out of general use and saved as historical artefacts.³ In the meantime, they had acquired a documentary-like aura – offering a testimony of territorial sacrifice. Their display in an exhibition setting, however, attributes to postcards a certain transgressive quality, as traces of an infrastructural past that stays silent in an archive. Yet these postcards were not produced to be displayed in museums, not even in their shops – one of the few places where it is possible to buy a postcard nowadays (hence, as commodities). Assembling archival postcards in the novel context of an art installation allowed us to understand the complex relations between modernization, infrastructures and their symbolic representations.

Sacrificed Landscapes

Our installation set out to open up new insights into the relation between modern infrastructures and their representation, the mutation of landscapes and the materiality of extractive economies – here presented as a sacrifice: an irreversible destruction of something based on an expected return (Reinert 2015). For a century, eastern Estonia has hosted power plants, chemical industries, and underground and open-cast mines, all of which have shaped the landscapes into something previously unknown. Energy production is still the most important economic sector in this region, employing thousands of people, but it has also caused Estonia to produce three times as many carbon dioxide emissions as outlined in European Union recommendations. Another feature of Estonia is the significant destruction caused by military battles in World War II. Many of its pre-war inhabitants were not allowed to move back to the country, which was instead repopulated by people arriving from every corner of the USSR.

Narva is a paradigmatic case of this: ninety-eight percent of the town was destroyed during World War II. In the 1960s, under Soviet rule, construction of the Balti and Eesti power plants accompanied the creation of a reservoir, which itself generated a distinct landscape known as Narva Venice (a series of garages accessed via sailing canals, see Martínez and Pikner 2019). In 2011, the Auvere power plant was added in a



Postcard from Narva.
National Library of
Estonia

joint-venture with the French company Alstom. These stations produce 4.5 million tons of ash (highly alkaline) a year and have caused the local water supply to be the most polluted in Estonia owing to its high phosphorus, carbon and heavy metal content. Narva is also characterized nowadays by the closure of the Kreenholm textile factory, which used to employ more than ten thousand people. Accordingly, we included in the installation a broken red brick from the debris left behind at Kreenholm.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the beaches of **Sillamäe** were a popular holiday destination among St Petersburg aristocrats and intellectuals. After World War II, however, the area was developed as a secret modernist town (not appearing on any public map due to its production of uranium). In the 1990s, some alarming news about radioactive waste were made public and great part of the industry was closed down or departed after this finding. The main remaining chemical company is Silmet, which currently produces tantalum and niobium. In Sillamäe, we nonetheless saw

Postcards from Sillamäe.
National Library of
Estonia



impressive architectural heritage, nice beaches and well-arranged flowers and trees, while we also learned that the few tourists who visit this town are more interested in the curiosities of its atomic past than in the local scenic beauty. For the installation, the remains provided are not strictly archaeological but rather discursive. We noticed that the apple crops around the main chemical-producing area were intact, with no-one willing to collect them. We also included a series of attractive seashells found on the (markedly empty) beach located in front of the central promenade, which demonstrate how stigma might last for several decades after atomic activity has ceased, thus preventing tourists from staying any longer than a casual 20-minute walkthrough.



In the case of **Kiviõli**, shale oil activity produced artificial hills which have now been turned into skiing facilities (with occasional surfaces of black snow due to pollution). With financial support from the European Union, an adventure park was created in 2013 in the former industrial area. Contemporary relics from the mine appear in the form of a promotional flyer for the park and an entry ticket. Nearby, in **Kohtla-Järve**, the history of shale oil activity began in ancient times, yet open-cast industrial extraction only started in 1919, when the State Oil Shale Industrial Corporation was formed. When the project began, thousands of miners moved to the area, and processing factories and a railway station were built. Nowadays in Kohtla-Järve, one encounters high unemployment, lunar landscapes, rusting machinery, abandoned houses, pipelines and the debris left behind by the processing of shale oil. Of course, also the ongoingness of the present, as there are dozens of thousands of inhabitants in the area. Here, the leading company is Viru Keemia, which processes two million tons of shale oil rock fragments per year and 250,000 tons of synthetic oil and gas through the Kiviter and Galoter processes. These use large quantities of water, in which the solid polluted residue contains toxic substances that might leach into surrounding areas. For the installation, we provided a sample of the residue that this process produces too.

Postcards from Kiviõli.
National Library of
Estonia



Conclusion

It is a fact that people hardly ever send postcards anymore, since communication has become overwhelmingly digital, virtual and multi-sited. Yet as a particular kind of document, postcards possess their own logic and evoke particular affects and responses, presenting a version of the world as the authors of these documents would like to see it (Riles 2006). As with infrastructures and archives, postcards are devices for putting things in order in space and time; and they are also capable of producing social relations, not just of reflecting them. In postcards, knowledge is always in the making, dependent upon use, context and publics. These are knowledge systems for relating and for storytelling, transporting the past into the present and eliciting new forms of relationships. In contrast, the images of the postcards show dehumanized landscapes; humans are implied through the industrial processes depicted but are not actually present in any of the illustrations.

Postcard from Kohtla-Järve.

National Library of
Estonia

Overall, archives and infrastructures are an intrinsic part of modern technologies, with the capacity to present territories as objects of care or sacrifice. The archival material that we gathered makes corporeal and affective the afterlife of infrastructures and the side-effects of modernization, presenting complex modes of enduring and of representation. Indeed, the archive of postcards where we worked, in the National Library of Estonia, was arranged to embody larger political structures and visions. It followed the Soviet policy dictating that each national library should have at least one copy of everything printed in the USSR. These archives projected themselves into the future, and yet they could not have survived without the maintenance work of many different professionals in diverse political contexts.

Notes:

¹ The exhibition was part of Tallinn Photomonth 2019. The connections that formed elements of our installation ranged from contemporary archaeology to Fluxus's mail art, and Robert Smithson's notions of the non-site, autopography and deltiology.

² For more information, see: <http://www.estonica.org/en/>

³ In contrast, postcard illustration has traditionally been seen as merely a minor photographic genre.

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