

## Finland: The Road of Poems and Borders

Suzanne Lacy

In June 1990, as part of the "Meeting of the Worlds Festival" in Eastern Finland, I presented *The Road of Poems and Borders* (*Runojen ja Rajojen Tie* in Finnish). Just over one year in planning and preproduction, involving a series of artist's interactions variously called "collaborative," "cooperative," or "supportive," at this early reporting date (Summer 1990) *Road* is still being processed by participants to determine its overall form and meaning.

Finland is a country rich in and greatly appreciative of culture. In the summers that have no nights a profusion of art, music, and drama festivals invigorate the country, bringing appreciators from all over the world. In the small town of Joensuu (population 47,099) near the Russian border, this year's annual Song Festival was transformed by a collaboration with PAND, International (Performers and Artists for Nuclear Disarmament founded by Harry Belafonte in 1983). "Meeting of the Worlds" brought together musicians and performers from David Byrne to the Leningrad Philharmonic who contributed their talent to the theme of world peace. Led by Finnish organizer Tuula Linsio and the PAND Finland Board (featuring some of the nation's most distinguished artists), the Festival established a prototype for sophisticated multi-disciplinary artistic involvement in global themes--unsentimental, uncompromising in the excellence of the hundreds of artists involved, and original in its relation to multiple audiences of local inhabitants, national residents, and (in a more limited way) international guests and audiences. The Festival included scores of concerts, a peace symposium, an international art exhibition, actions for children, our performance--*The Road of Poems and Borders*--and a culminating, nationally publicized opening of the Russian-Finnish border to allow a train of 1,600 people cross to Sortavala, Russia, for a World Peace concert.

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My involvement with the Festival began in April 1989 when Arthur Strimling, New York actor and director and Vice President of PAND, International, suggested on a visit to California that we do a site specific performance, one that would involve the townspeople in the Festival. In June of that year I traveled to Finland for the first of four planning and production sessions, and there met the theatrical, visual and literary artists who would co-vent and co-produce *Road*.

The performance consisted of four distinct theatrical events that took place during the five day Festival as well as the more difficult to evaluate process that occurred between participating artists during the preceding year. Though certainly the glib superficiality of postmodernism's reference to diverse visual styles is not applicable, in one sense the term describes: each of the four events had a shape and form language coherent unto itself, but when considered as various aspects of one whole, the shape remains illusive. In one sense they appear a "retrospective" of shapes from my past works, involving mass media, postal communications, choreographed spectacle, and multiple intimate and unstructured interactions in a public space. In another, the diverse forms reflect the various styles of different collaborators. Apart from these differences in appearance, what does bind the four events together is their common meditation on borders, the participation of so-called ordinary people as performers, and the intense and complicated structure of personal relationships, artistic styles, and levels of responsibility that underlay and eventually produced the whole.

As of this writing, those who contributed most to the performance are sending letters to each other, reflecting on individual intentions and experiences in an attempt to create a mutual understanding of the whole. Our arena: the personal relationships; the authorship and ownership of the vision; the reflection on the images of the piece; the artistic shape of the whole; politics and the effects of our work. Following are basic descriptions of the four events which, when combined with the letters from participants, will form the basis for an understanding of the total work. These will be published in a catalogue called *Encounters on the Road of Poems and Borders* by POSTI-TELE of Finland.

### Talking at the Borders

*Dear Friend, far away,*

*Have you ever had an experience during a border crossing? Dreamed about borders? Do you have a story about personal or spiritual borders; neighborhood, city, state or country borders? Borders between right and wrong, self and other, land and sea, day and night, life and death? Are there borders that are needed, and borders not needed? We invite you to create a performance artwork with us. In the northern*

*light of Finland, in June 1990, your story/voice with hundreds of others will be part of an artwork for peace. We are a group of American and Finnish artists preparing a performance for The Meeting of the Worlds, an art and music festival and symposium on peace, sponsored by PAND, International, Artists for Peace. Our group is exploring the theme of borders, and we hope to have thousands of people all over the world work with us as long-distance participants. The performance is called The Road of Poems and Borders. We ask for your help, your personal participation. Please send us your postcards or one page letter, with a personal story about borders, and we will read/enact it during the five day Festival. We hope to have 200 readings a day, 20 each hour, all over the small city of Joensuu in eastern Finland. We look forward to hearing from you by April 30, 1990.*

In January the postcards went out, 5,000 in six different languages. They went to people who were friends, associates or acquaintances of the project participants, and included a range of countries all over the world. Then, during the long months at the end of the Finnish winter the responses started to arrive. The postcards and letters, each containing a personal border story, came from over forty countries. They came in the form of poems, of personal experience, and dreams. They came in their own languages, in Japanese, Chinese, Russian and Finnish; in English, Spanish and French. They came in Hungarian and Arabic, from Africa and South America. Over 600 people sent their stories out into the Finnish summer, and there they were read, pondered over, and then translated into English and Finnish and prepared for public presentation. In the main lobby of the post office the original letters were suspended from the ceiling forming a wall of voices speculating on, mourning for, and celebrating borders.

Each day of the Festival about 15 readers volunteered to take a set of letters with them wherever they went. At each hour on the hour, from nine in the morning until ten at night, the readers would stop what they were doing and read one letter. Maybe they read in a busy restaurant, calling for attention by ringing a fork on a glass. Maybe they sat intimately next to a friend in a park, sharing the story. In concerts the stories were read between songs by the performers. In classrooms messages from schoolchildren in one country were read to those in another. In hospitals and post offices and old age homes, groups of readers gathered to read a single letter, or to read all their letters one after another.

After each reading they passed a blank postcard around, if there were listeners, and they sent a message back to the original writer letting him or her know the circumstances surrounding the reading. The letters were read everywhere, 15 per hour, each of the four days of the Festival. Whenever and wherever they were read, the tracings of yellow footsteps were found, a visual reminder that someone read a border story there.

Talking at the Borders was designed by Lacy, Strimling, and Tuire Hindikke. Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sanchez participated with a special exhibition on the new cold war border axis: *A Message from the U. S.-Mexican Border*. (See document following.) This 8 foot by 16 foot installation in English and Finnish drew attention to border paradigms and world politics.

### Meeting of the Youth

At five in the morning when the first of the production crew arrived at the Ilosaari pool, the sun had already been up for hours. The water in the horseshoe shaped natural lagoon had warmed only slightly as a result of the constant flow of the surrounding icy waters of the river on its way from the mountains. The crew moved quietly across the island, picking up pieces of broken glass at the last minute, tying back branches that obscured access to the water, and laying hundreds of white towels and black rubber innertubes at the water's edge. Next came the sound installers, running cable, setting up speakers, testing microphones. By 8:00 am the welcome signs, storage area and orientation room were set up, and monitors, photographers, and camera crews arrived for their briefing. Outside the directors rehearsed cues with their walkie talkies. Next came the swimmers, 214 teenagers between the ages of 13 and 23, mostly younger and scrubbed blonde, mostly girls, shy, energetic, and intent on learning their cues. They practiced amidst giggles during the orientation session until they knew them by heart, and then went out on the park lawn to practice again.

Hidden by the trees on the lawn behind the lagoon, the performers lined up in their red t-shirts, getting last minute safety instructions from their leaders. The rescue team and ambulance hid out of the sightlines, photographers stationed themselves strategically around the island, and the directing crew counted down the minutes. At noon the edges of the riverbank and the bridge stretching across the river a half mile from the island began to fill with people. Overhead the small single engine plane with its photographer was ready to make its first pass high in the air above the lagoon.

From the island a sound composition of musical and natural sounds--drums, birds, flutes, water--drifted on erratic currents of wind to the audience, like snatches of a conversation. At a signal indiscernible to the audience, the lines of teenagers began to move slowly around the island, their red shirts bright against the green foliage and blue water. Slow and evenly they marched, forming a regularly dotted line that finally encircled the entire lagoon. They stopped, waiting.

A sharp whistle pierced the air, and the students turned to face each other across the lagoon. Seconds suspended, a minute went by, and then another whistle. As one, the 214 performers raised red signal flags shoulder

height, and the dots they formed on the horizon bled together into a bright ring of color.

A last whistle and 428 red flags flew into air and with a great yell of mutual encouragement they ran into the water with their innertubes. From overhead in the airplane it was most visible, the red circle dissolving at the edges of the shoreline and reappearing again as the cluster of red shapes swam toward the center of the lagoon. From the river bank one could hear their shrill giggles of excitement and shock as they hit the cold water and paddled toward the bell in the center.

Suspended in water and time, they closed the spaces between themselves to form a red mass of color in the center of the lagoon, then, as the first swimmer reached for the bell rope, bells and musical score blended together announcing the swimmers' triumph over the cold water, the successful completion of the performance. It took no time at all to swim back to the shore, to dry off and in the process flamboyantly wave their white towels at the audience. The performance was over. Their picnic, with tales of their individual experiences, food, and a live band was about to begin.

*Collaborating Directors of this performance include, beside Lacy and Strimling, Petr Rehor, Timo Ventola, and Riku Malinen. The sound score was composed by Jarmo Kähkönen.*

### **Meeting of Three Ladies/Across Time and Space**

It was nearing 6:00 in the evening Finland time. Somewhere in the middle of America it was nearing 10:00 in the morning, while just across the Karelian border, in the land annexed by Russia in 1944, it was almost 7:00 pm. In Vaupaudenpuisto, the small park across from the City Hall in Joensuu, people began to gather with their various forms of portable radios, all tuned to Yleisradio, Finland's public radio station.

Only three blocks away in the radio station, the performance directors waited nervously while the engineers struggled to make contact with the Minnesota Public Radio station in St. Paul and with carphone from a car parked just on the other side of the Russian border not more than 60 kilometers away. Contact was made, then lost; made, then lost. At exactly 6:00 the program began. One at a time the three old women living in different countries under markedly different conditions and social systems began to talk about their lives. The first half hour of the program introduced them to each other and to the radio audience, through pre-recorded conversations artfully woven together into ten minute segments. While they had corresponded once by letter, they had not yet spoken and were anticipating their first meeting.

Salme Ehrukainen lives in a small industrial town on the Eastern edge of Finland, in the small house she bought with her husband when he was still alive. At 65, she is becoming more active in community life and takes a eager

interest in the events of the world. In her tiny farmhouse surrounded with birch trees and flowers she gathers her information on nightly television. She grew up on a farm in the shadow of continuing wars. She met her husband in a lumbering mill where he worked, and she raised his children until the time when he could no longer work because of heart disease. Suddenly one evening at 44 he was gone, and she was left with four children. She went to work in the factory and life was hard, and now at retirement she is content with her pension and her life, but perhaps restless. She looks forward to the radio event, the personal beginning of her "travels" to foreign places. She worries that the others are more educated and might look down on her simple insights.

Aili Jarventa was born in America of Finnish parents, and during her childhood she lived in two worlds. At home in the Finnish community she spoke the language and learned the ways of her parent's native land. During the long walk to school each day she made the transition into English and an American culture unforgiving of ethnic differences. In northern Minnesota, however, the Finnish community with its cooperatives and advanced political ideas thrived. When the Great Depression came, her father moved them to the countryside where they could survive by returning to rural Finnish agricultural practices. After high school she fulfilled her mother's ambitions, getting a college degree, and later returning to visit Finland. Her children, in their turn, fulfilled her own ambitions with their music and scholastic achievements. Now, her husband quite ill, Aili lives in Minneapolis in a senior housing complex. Still active and interested in her work as a poet and translator, young at 72, Aili is wearing under the strain as she provides round the clock care for her beloved husband. She is nervous that her Finnish won't be comprehensible to the other two women, since she has no place to practice it.

Elina Jermolajeva sent her greetings to the other two by letter from Sortavala, Russia. Just over the Russian border, not more than two hours by train from Joensuu, Elina lives a prosperous life by western Russian standards. At seventy, she looks back upon her family's emigration to Russia as an escape from Finnish fascism, an escape on a stormy night across a dangerously choppy lake with border police behind. With their last money their tenant farmer father had bought a small sailboat, and on this they pinned their hopes for a new life. After this, she said in her letter to the others, the adventures of life began! Hard work, rationed food, and then one night in 1933 they heard the rumors of hundreds of people deported to unknown destinations, the beginning of the Stalinist reign of terror. They had escaped the wolf, she wrote, only to find themselves in the mouth of the bear. She was dismissed from the schools for not being naturalized, the faculty at her music college imprisoned, and then the Winter War began. In 1943 her sister starved to death and she adopted her child. Throughout her life the tragedies of living in the Soviet Union never seemed to dampen her enthusiasm for her chosen land; she could not imagine that her Finnish origin counterparts in America and Finland had

things any better. As for now, she lives compatibly with her children in a three room apartment house and practices her beloved music as the leader of an amateur chorus. She has, she states firmly, no time for mourning.

As the sound portraits on the first half of the radio program ended, the air space emptied almost visibly, and suddenly Salme was speaking: "Aili, are you there? Elina, are you there?" In an electric moment the audience was suddenly charged with all the excitement of a long anticipated first meeting, one to which they, along with thousands of others, would be public witnesses.

Salme sitting in her tiny kitchen with bright flowers in boxes outside the window wanted to know if Aili considered her self American or Finnish, if Elina thought of herself as Russian? What did Elina think about the border they shared, the one created by Russia after the war to annex half of Finnish Karelia?

At the radio station at St. Paul, Minnesota, Aili sat inside a sound studio and wondered what it felt like to experience perestroika up close, if the Gorbachev that had just visited the Twin Cities was as popular with Russians as he was with Americans?

Just inside the Russian border, Elina sat in the car of Jouuko Blomberg, the program producer, and joined the live radio program through his car phone. That morning the communications system had broken down as it often does between these rural parts of Russia and Finland. With a hastily gathered visa the program producer had to get her as near to the border, and the YLE radio truck parked just on the other side, as the Russian guards would allow. Elina wondered what Aili, living far away in an area untouched by war, thought were major threats to world peace? In a loaded question, she asked Salme whether the Finnish woman thought it right that people in Eastern Finland could influence negatively the production of nuclear power by their Russian neighbors?

Their conversation slowed, came finally to an end as the program time ran out and communications became more difficult. Before it ended they touched on how poor and old people survive in the developed country of America, whether Elina hoped one day to achieve a higher standard of living like Westerners, and if each was satisfied with the way their life had turned out. As the hands on the clock approached 7 pm Finnish time, they said their goodbyes, hoping that one day they could meet each other. At seven the live air space vanished, and regular programming resumed. In the small park in Joensuu, two hundred people who had listened together, turned off their portable radios, some leaving, some lingering to talk about what they had heard.

*This performance was produced by Jouuko Blomberg and YLEIS Radio, with co-directors Suzanne Lacy and Pirkko Kurikka, and Susan Steinmen, co-producer. On-site directors included Chris Tetlin, Marianne Wargelin (Minnesota); Timo Keränen (Finland); Jukka Hyttiäinen (USSR). The Listening Event in the Park was directed by Arthur Strimling and Tuire Hindikka.*

### **Meeting at the Market**

At 7:00 am on Thursday the Joensuu market, one large city block in the center of the city, began to come to life. It was the biggest market day of the week, and this was the week of the international Song Festival which brought thousands of people from all over the world. As they sat up their stalls to sell warm Finnish breads, fruit and vegetables, artisan crafts and miscellaneous hardware items, the merchants anticipated a busy day. Two women walked to the center of the market, laid down on the ground with their hands touching, and waited while a third person traced a chalk outline of their "meeting" on the asphalt. Someone with a camera appeared to photograph the event. In time the photo was posted on a freestanding bulletin board, the first of literally hundreds of meetings that would be documented that day.

For months the Finnish artists had been working to include both the general public and "special" groups in the market event. School children of five years, taxi drivers, pregnant women and women with children, teenagers, businessmen, the merchants themselves, all were invited to have a meeting in the market. Each meeting was recorded on the pavement and documented with a color photograph. Two hours after each meeting, participants could return to find their image mounted with hundreds of others on the growing photographic wall.

One week before the event a specially selected group of "recorders" met with the artist creators to discuss a unique role. Sometime during the day, these writers, journalists, sociologists, photographers and other observers of contemporary life would visit the marketplace. Later, each in the medium of their choice, they would report on what they had observed. In the manner of gossip, rumor, or innuendo they would variously interpret the "strange" practices of the local townspeople. In this way the day was recorded in truth and in fantasy, the recording group offering a metaphor for the way art becomes myth and meaning is a matter of perspective.

Throughout the day prearranged meetings took place in front of the bread stand, next to the coffee stand, and among the flowers. Often, people coming to the market to shop were enticed to try a spontaneous "meeting" with their children, their companion, even with strangers. Lying on the ground a local television reporter delivered her report. Groups of teenagers formed a star with their bodies, mothers joined ecstatic children on the ground. Each hour the tempo shifted, corresponding with the marketplace, and slowly at first, then more and more rapidly, the drawings built up. Between stalls, on



the borders, in the spaces between, and then as the five o'clock closing time approached, meetings moved in over the top of spaces vacated by merchants. As the market day came to a close at six o'clock, the first overall perspective of the drawing appeared. Throughout the long evening people continued to meet, and without the busy surround of the market the meetings took on a contemplative air as the drawings spread out over the surface.

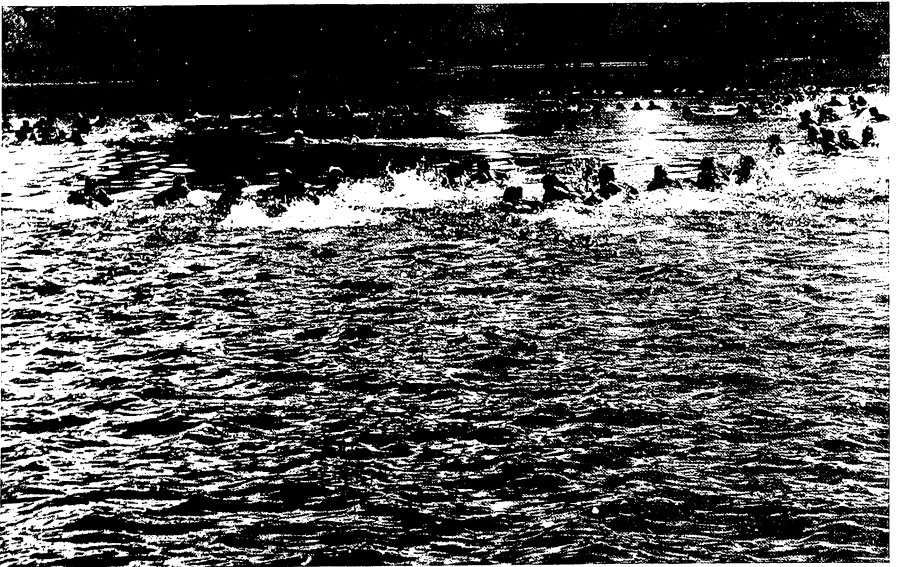
Twilight came around 11 pm, and from the streets surrounding the near vacant market came white coated sweepers, pushing large brooms as they walked briskly toward one end of the square. They lined up, waiting until all forty had arrived, and then on a signal advanced quietly, deliberately, in a line across the market, pushing their brooms ahead. The drawing that represented the hundreds of mutual portraits of city residents and foreign visitors was passed over, slightly diminished, and all the debris left from the day removed. As quickly as they arrived the cleaners vanished, leaving the square clean for the next day's market. Like the remains of an ancient civilization, the chalk tracings formed a surface for Friday's business as usual.

*This performance was designed by Allan Kaprow and Suzanne Lacy, and coordinated in Finland by Ihva Aula. With her, Soile Koistinen and Anne Kartunen were instrumental in organizing the hundreds of participants, assistants and photographers.*

*California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland, California*



*The Road of Poems and Borders. Meeting of the Youth.* Performance by Suzanne Lacy and Arthur Strimling, with Petr Rehor, Timo Ventola and Riku Malinen. Photo: Satu Altonen.



*The Road of Poems and Borders. Meeting of the Youth.* Performance by Suzanne Lacy and Arthur Strimling, with Petr Rehor, Timo Ventola and Riku Malinen. Photo: Satu Altonen.

## A Message from the U.S.-Mexico Border

*(Warning: By the time this piece is exhibited, published or broadcast in your country, the information will very likely be out-dated.)*

Dear fellow citizen of the End-of-the-Century Society:

We approach the last decade of the 20th century submerged in total perplexity as we witness, from the U.S.-Mexico border region, structural changes in the world cartography.

We can't help but to feel like uninvited actors in a disnarrative science-fiction movie with the following scenario:

*The Cold War ends as the U.S. drug war begins. The South replaces the East as the new threatening otherness. Russia implements perestroika and glasnost. A new era of East-West relations begins. The Chinese state carries out the massacre of Tiananmen Square. The German wall is abolished exactly when the U.S. begins to militarize its border with Mexico. Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia experience an instantaneous but relatively pacific transition toward "democracy." The Salvadorean civil war reaches stalemate. Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu falls while Chilean dictator Pinochet loses the awaited first election since the fall of President Allende. Central America and Mexico move to the right. To the outrage of the international community, the U.S. invades Panama. The Sandinistas lost the elections and the Christian Democrats win in East Germany . . . ad infinitum.*

The birth pains of the new millennia are overwhelming. We don't know what will happen next. We cannot even imagine it. The amount, complexity, and intensity of the changes surpass our capability to digest them and decodify them adequately.

For the moment, as much as we can aspire to is recognizing collectively (a) that drastically different relationships between East/West and therefore between North/South are being developed; (b) that the centers of power are shifting; (c) that a new international society is being born; and (d) that a new culture will have to emerge from its foundation.

In the U.S. there is a movement of aperture equivalent to glasnost mistakenly called "multiculturalism." Unfortunately, there are aggressive government sectors devoted to its destruction. And while artists and writers are leading and chronicling the changes everywhere, U.S. senator Jessie Helms and colleagues are attempting to censor and defund the arts.

As border artists, we wonder what will be our role in this whole process? Should we be warriors, philosophers or diplomats? And what kind of art must we make to contribute to a true world dialogue?

For the moment, as Europe prepares for the grand opening of its borders, we are preparing ourselves for another major project: the grand re-definition of 1992. We won't be celebrating the "discovery of America" nor the "encounter of cultures." We will be attending a funeral for all the victims of 500 years of genocide of our indigenous cultures.

Guillermo Gómez-Peña/Robert Sánchez  
U.S.-Mexico border  
10 years before the end of the century



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