



The Locus+ Archive

Stefan Gec

Trace Elements, 1990 & Buoy, 1996

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The first part, titled *Trace Elements*, took the form of eight large bells (1990). These bells were cast from steel taken from eight decommissioned Soviet submarines that were being scrapped at Battleship Wharf, in the north eastern port of Blyth, Northumberland. This wharf had been used to scrap redundant warships returning from the First World War and the Second World War, making it a fitting location to witness the first signs of the end of the Cold War. By transforming the metal from submarines into bells I hoped to create a physical link between the larger historical events and the more personal context of family experience.

The bells were installed on a wooden pontoon that surrounds one leg of the High Level Bridge that spans the River Tyne, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. At low tide the bells were hanging and exposed, and at high tide submerged; the tidal flow pulling the bells clappers, causing them to ring, echoing their former role below the waterline.

In order to expand the work conceptually I began the second stage of the project under the titled *Detached Bell Tower* (1994-95). The eight bells were moved and installed in three locations close to national borders: Glasgow, Helsinki and Derry; the three points delineating the extremities of a large triangle across Northern Europe. The project attempted to map and engage with a changing continent.

The slow movement of the bells as they traversed Europe, stopping for a short time then moving on, had the genesis of *Buoy* (1996): the final part of the trilogy within it. To continue this process of transformation and movement all eight bells were melted down and cast into the heavy ballast weights for a specially made, fully operational navigational buoy. The Class II Special Mark buoy will occupy approximately ten coastal locations over a number of years and will be identified by passing ships as a 'temporary buoy' by its black and yellow livery. It will be positioned to ensure traffic separation and identify spoil grounds, military exercise zones and recreation zones.

The movement of *Buoy*, loaded with its Cold War history, will take it through the waters it once patrolled as submarines, this time guiding vessels in the international shipping lanes of the Atlantic Ocean, Norwegian, North, Baltic and Barents Sea, in locations close the cities of Reykjavik, Belfast, Dublin, Rotterdam, Oslo, Stockholm, Riga and the Arctic port of Murmansk (its final location). This isolated harbour will see the return to Russian waters of the transformed metal; it will also have been a place that the submarines visited as Murmansk was an important base for the Soviet North Atlantic Fleet. The port is now the centre of Russia's (naval) nuclear decommissioning operations, and is host to row upon row of old nuclear submarines gathered in its harbour. They are all waiting for the removal of their aging and unstable reactors, before being scrapped. This operation has only compounded the pollution problem affecting the area (Kola Peninsular) and follows decades of environmental damage through mining and storage of radioactive waste, making it one of the most polluted areas in the

world.

The movement of Buoy will be realised by co-operation with I.A.L.A members (International Association of Lighthouse Authorities). This world wide organisation is made up of individual countries who are responsible for the safe passage of shipping within their own 'national territorial waters'. The first stage of this collaboration has been achieved with the help and assistance of The Commission of Irish Lights in Dublin, who positioned Buoy in two Irish Sea locations over a six month period: first off Belfast, then Dublin. The next stage will take Buoy to Iceland, then to Scandinavia. As Buoy will be positioned out at sea - thereby making it inaccessible to a conventional audience - a G.P.S. device (Global Positioning System) has been fitted. This is attached to the buoy, enabling its exact location to be sent, via satellite, to Oxford University Geography Department. There it is transcribed onto a World Wide Website along with other contextual information, thereby allowing a potentially large audience to follow it electronically through the website. To widen the information base of Buoy additional electronic equipment is to be fitted by Trinity House (U.K. waters) engineers to make it 'intelligent'. This will allow Buoy to gather and relay (via G.P.S. and short wave radio) its immediate environment: such as sea conditions, wind speed, etc. This information will also go on the website where it will be used by the increasingly automated lighthouse authorities. The inclusion of this 'intelligent' element will also bring the project into the present or 'real time' while retaining its historical context. This process will also broach the metal's former role and history as submarines, and their past surveillance and reconnaissance activities.