

# Sculpture

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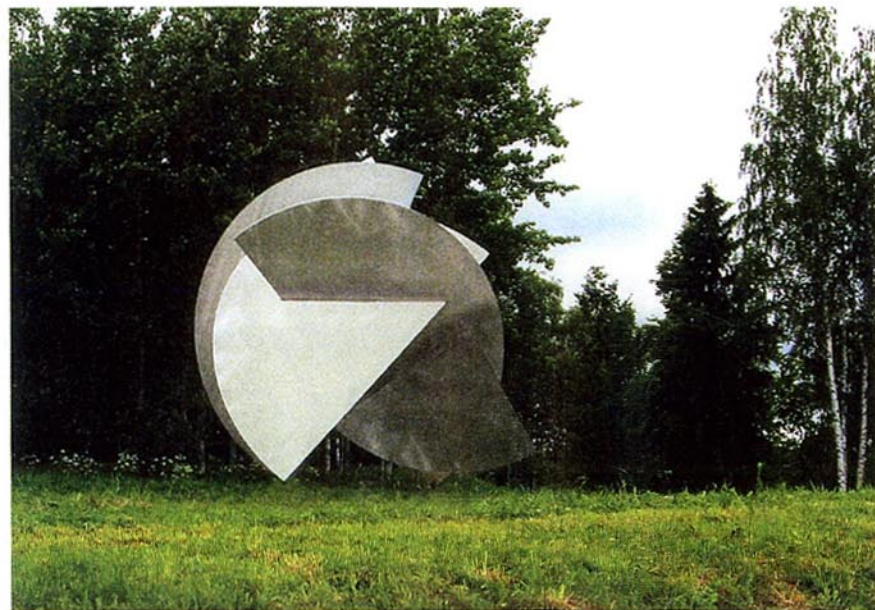
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## Pirkkala Sculpture Park

by Allison Hunter



The Pirkkala Sculpture Park, which has no gate, no entrance fee, not even a sign, spills out from the center of town into the backyards and sidewalks of Pirkkala, 47 miles north of Helsinki, Finland. “We’re putting this town on the map,” says one of the artists invited by curator and local art hero, Villu Jaanisoo. The 40-year-old Estonian artist lured 20 international artists to participate in the 2003 Sculpture Symposium and Iron Pour, a three-week residency and workshop that generated the inaugural collection.

Without an office, much less a board of directors, Jaanisoo convinced the municipal government to invest in his curatorial debut—the creation of a “borderless” sculpture park. Having participated in numerous sculpture symposia throughout the world, Jaanisoo knew he could populate the park almost instantly by staging a symposium

and iron pour, with room, board, and materials provided for participating artists. However, he refused to limit the range of work by medium (cast iron), and he actively recruited artists whose approaches to sculpture go beyond the

boundaries of tradition. “At first, sculpture was bronze, stone, and wood, and now it can be sugar cubes, shit, signs, or things we haven’t seen yet. Sculpture has changed more than anything and that’s exciting,” he enthuses.

The resulting collection includes a modest range (given the three-week time limit) of three-dimensional work, including thousand-pound metal forms on pedestals, as well as a decaying cow horn installation, a site-specific work involving a Finnish shed, and a 40-foot-high sculpture made of steel fencing and twist ties.

The iron pour, which started late in the endless “Midsummer night,” drew local townspeople, foundry workers, and news media, all fascinated by the cupola, a miniature blast furnace based on a medieval model. The cupola design, introduced to Jaanisoo by American sculptors, was handmade from contemporary materials (think metal barrels and duct tape). The pour introduced this rogue casting method to art students and foundry workers who watched in awe. Indeed, the furnace stole the show as volunteers (mostly art students from the symposium), draped in full-body leather gear, collected the spewing molten iron into a heavy bucket carried by two people



Above: Jaak Soans, *Whirl*, 2003. Steel, 400 x 400 x 400 cm. Right: Hanna Vihriälä, *Equipment to find the princess*, 2003. Steel and stainless steel, 40 x 180 x 60 cm.

Right: John Ruppert, *Catenoid*, 2003. Chain-link fabric, 550 x 220 x 220 cm. Bottom: Villu Jaanisoo, *Rubberduck*, 2003. Rubber, 330 x 380 x 250 cm.

who poured the fiery red liquid into dozens of black sand molds.

Most of the molds, which ranged from five to 50 pounds, belonged to the art students whose works were exhibited at the end of the symposium. Larger works by symposium artists were cast off-site at local foundries. This alone was a coup for Jaanisoo, who deftly talked his way into gaining access and free labor from the pristine industrial factories. According to the wily artist, "It's about personal connections (talking, joking, and explaining the art). It's not so much about money. It's about how particular factories want something else, maybe a piece from me."

Despite the odd hours of access to the factories, sometimes at three or five in the morning, a handful of artists jumped at the chance to cast their molds (in bronze, steel, or aluminum), a process worth thousands of dollars. Coral Lambert, a New Orleans-based British artist, cast her 1.5-ton steel *Isolammi (Big Water)* at "one of the biggest steel factories in that part of the world," one normally used for casting submarine parts: "Due to insurance reasons, I was only able to do a minimum amount of labor at the factory; I could be there as a director. This involved a different set of artistic skills. For example, my foam pattern was unconventional, and, as the sand was packed onto it during the sand mold process, it was designed to compress so that the form would become more pronounced through the process. The workers had not done this before so they had to feel they could trust me. Even with the language differences, a mutual respect built up. When the translator had to run off, sign language worked. We also had the same steel-toe sandals, which helped."

Other artists felt strongly that the cost to the municipality was minimal compared to the value of the artworks, which were donated or loaned to the town. "It certainly has cost an awful



lot of money and effort and time and hours from the city for all this to happen. But they also got a hugely valuable product. They couldn't buy this stuff. There's labor from the artist but that's not really the value. The value is in the concepts and the years of profession behind the work," says John Ruppert, Chair of the Department of Art at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Jaanisoo and his wife, artist Hanna Vihriälä, view the symposium as a micro-community where artists network, philosophize, and mentor younger art students. "Most of the time as an artist, you're alone. It's really lonely work and the whole idea of a symposium is to come together," says Vihriälä. The artists and the dozen students lived, worked, and ate at the Nouliala Elementary School, where even the largest egos had to crouch gingerly on tiny plastic chairs in the children's cafeteria. "We think it's important that students learn how to do their own casting and how to do it cheaply. It's one of the reasons we started doing these workshops, and it grew into this symposium," Jaanisoo explains.

And now, after the flurry of artistic activity, the town of Pirkkala plans to continue producing a sculpture symposium every two years and to establish a yearly residency program with one or two artists at a time,



either with Jaanisoo or another curator. According to Jouni Salonen, Pirkkala Secretary of Cultural Affairs, the town was not always so supportive: "A few years ago, some really opposed the idea of cast iron sculptures in nature." Perhaps overcoming that battle gave Jaanisoo the desire to show the town more than just cast iron. At the end of the day, the Pirkkala Sculpture Park is Jaanisoo's lesson, "to show people what sculpture is, what sculpture can be."

Allison Hunter is an artist, writer, and Web designer based in Houston, Texas. More information on the Pirkkala Sculpture Park can be found at [www.pirkkala.fi/sculpture](http://www.pirkkala.fi/sculpture).