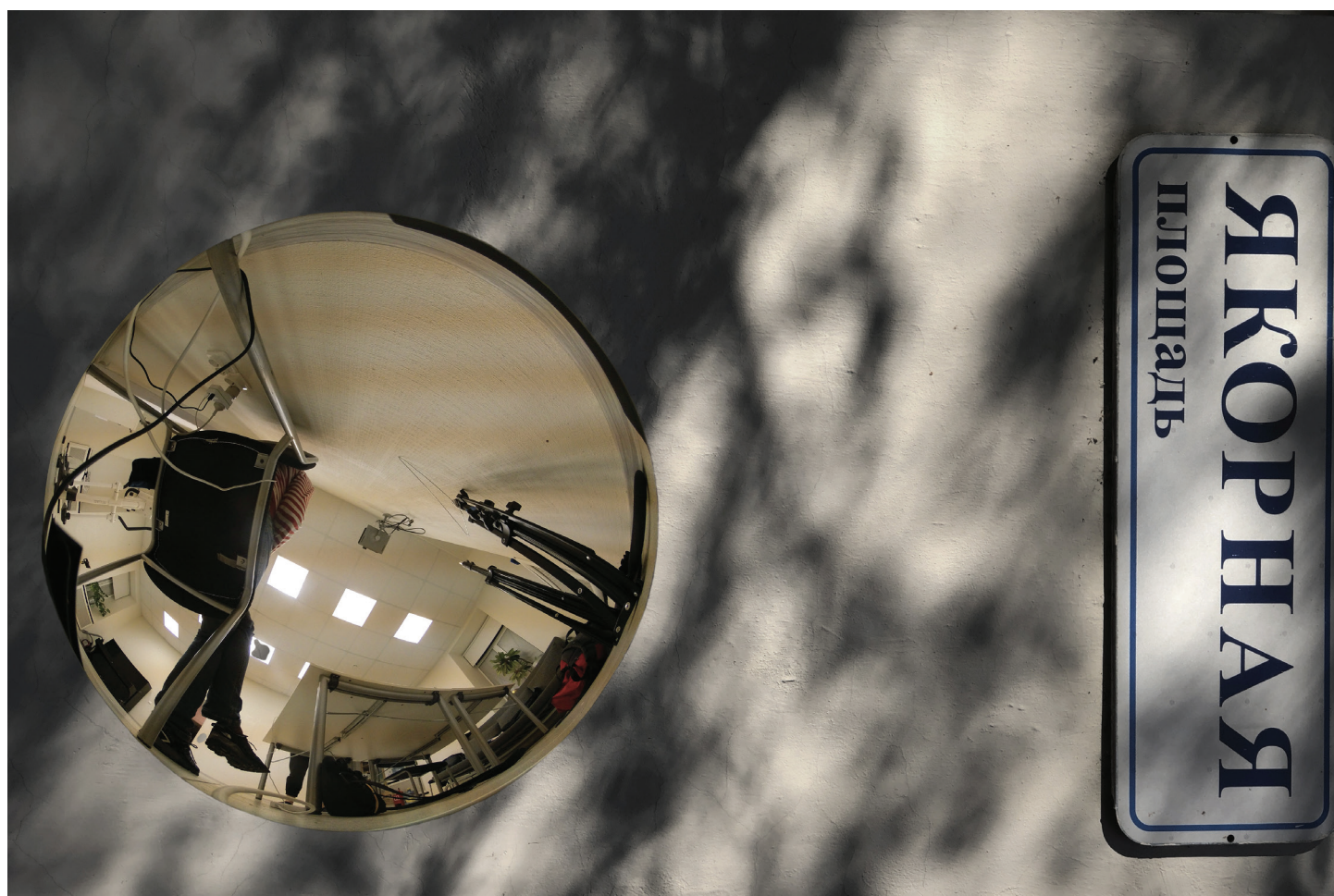


# Place of Anchors

Virginia Hilyard + Fiona Kemp  
essay by Helen Grace

Friday 5 to Saturday 27 September 2025  
Opening Saturday 6 September 2-4pm



ABBOTSLEIGH

GS Grace  
CossingtonSmithGallery

# The far side of time

There is perfection in Virginia Hilyard and Fiona Kemp's title for this exhibition, and they so precisely anchor their creative methods of 'stillness, observation and listening' within the scenes they have chosen. These deceptively simple techniques reveal place in a manner we can only call 'revelatory', especially in a geopolitical landscape which today cannot see their chosen locations as a lived reality – or actual 'presence'.

Using small, discrete technologies – smartphones, sound recording, 360 degree cameras – they situate themselves within the everyday life of Kotlin Island, off St Petersburg, taking their audiences into the deeply affective ambience of a public swimming pool, a children's park, a housing complex, and soaring to the heights of a Byzantine cathedral.

We find ourselves in intimate virtual worlds, that are all the more immersive because of their completely unremarkable and wondrous ordinariness. It is a quality of experience that is felt as much as seen or heard, because it surrounds and envelops us. The colours of 'golden autumn', the sounds of children's voices and of birdsong and traffic: the everyday, the absolutely quotidian, this most magic of substances. And then we are in a dizzying sacred space in which we find ourselves suspended in the heavens, high above the pendentives of a cathedral, immediately below its transcendent dome, as if we are ourselves holding up the dome and ever aware of the dangers of falling to earth: the intense feeling of gravity's force.

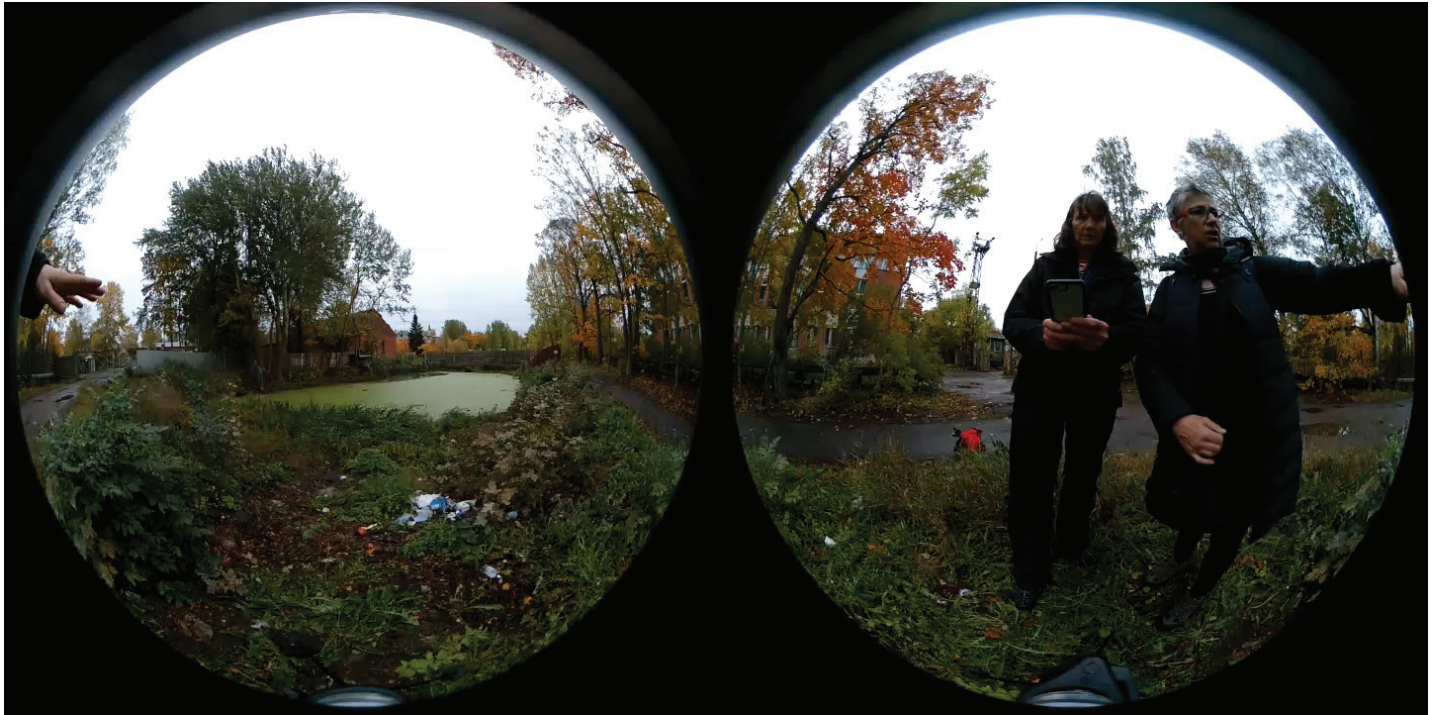


*On location, Dokovyy Basseyn, Kronstadt, Oct 2018*

The artists embed themselves in what is for them an unknown place, and in the stillness of their quiet observation and listening, they wait for the presence of place to enter them, assisted by prosthetic eyes and ears, used to record the experience of their absorption. It is a meditative process, requiring awareness and a particular alertness to their surroundings. In time, place reveals itself as having survived history, but the artists do not reveal that history, they simply allow the shadows of the past to enter the work in a spectral way.

There is a lot in these locations that is not immediately visible about the past and to dwell upon these elements feels a bit like divulging secrets but to grasp the force of what the artists have achieved here, we must risk some narration of the past. This is especially the case for audiences who are unfamiliar with or have forgotten the meaning of the past within these places to which the artists have taken us, allowing us to be engrossed in what is invisible to us, and forming the 'presence' which the work induces.





*On location, green duck pond, Kronstadt, Oct 2018*

So let us begin with the word 'anchor' which the artists have offered to us.

'Anchor Square' [Якорная площадь /Yakornaya ploschad'] is the square in front of the Naval Cathedral of Saint Nicholas in Kronstadt and you can see more clearly in transliteration that the Russian word "ploschad'", often translated as 'Square' [krasnyi ploschad' – Red Square] also has the sense of 'plaza' or 'place' – a public gathering place.

And the 'place of anchor' is literal in that the figure of a huge anchor embeds itself in the middle of the square, spatially as large or even larger than the Cathedral itself, and honouring the naval history of Kronstadt.

Anchor Square is the exact location, where in late February 1921, sailors from the Kronstadt garrison, many of whom were from the Battleship Petropavlovsk, voted en masse to adopt the [Petropavlovsk Resolution](#), a reasonable set of demands challenging the Bolshevik leaders to live up to the true aims of the Revolution. The Kronstadt Rebellion was bitterly suppressed and many regard this as the first really bad move made by the Revolutionary Government, the first betrayal of the Revolution.

The Naval Cathedral of Saint Nicholas [Морской Никольский Собор /Morskoy Nikolskiy Sobor] – the backdrop to the Petropavlovsk Resolution – is itself a remarkable neo-Romanesque-Byzantine structure, built early in the Twentieth Century and modeled on the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Consecrated in the presence of Tsar Nicholas II and his family in 1913, it had a short pre-Revolutionary existence, like other churches of the time – such as the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, demolished in 1931, to make way for the monumental Palace of the Soviets, which was never built and so the hole in the ground – the original Foundation Pit – became a popular swimming pool until it was rebuilt in the post-Soviet period.

The Kronstadt Naval Cathedral was converted into a cinema in 1929 and later into a House for Naval Officers, and then in the immediate post-Soviet period, a Naval Museum. It has since been restored and in 2013, a full century after its initial consecration, it was reconsecrated. Some recent reports suggest that it is now also the base for a Russian Orthodox Church-backed private military company recruiting believers to fight in Ukraine. As we begin to tell these stories, history slides into fiction and we are reminded of W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* and of its fictional photographs and its general mood and relation to the past:

might it not be [...] that we also have appointments to keep in the past, in what has gone before and is for the most part extinguished, and we must go there in search for places and people who have some connection with us on the far side of time, so to speak?<sup>1</sup>.

If we might allow a final observation from Sebald, on our connections to the past and to the present, he powerfully reminds us too "that we live on thin ice, that every moment we can fall through the ice<sup>2</sup>.

Place of Anchors takes us to this unsettling reality but gives us also the evidence of survival, anchored in memory, lived experience and creative acts.

Helen Grace

**Place of Anchors** – catalogue essay for exhibition  
Grace Cossington Smith Gallery, September 2025

<sup>1</sup> W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*. Modern Library, 2011, p258

<sup>2</sup> Heiner Boehncke, "Clair obscur: W. G. Sebalds Bilder," *Text + Kritik* 158 (April 2003), p55. In the original German: "dass wir uns ständig auf dünnem Eis bewegen, dass wir jeden Augenblick wegbrechen können."



Still from 'Ekho', 2025

#### List of works:

**Here, 2025** Single screen video, shot on iPhone 8, 16.12mins

**Ekho, 2025** Single screen video, shot on iPhone 8, 2.31mins

**Bathing suit, 2025** Single screen video, shot on iPhone 8 and Xiaomi 360 camera (Mi Sphere 2018), 1.21mins

**The edges of meaning, 2023** Single screen video samovars, shot on Xiaomi 360 camera (Mi Sphere 2018), 2.45mins

**Round and around** 9 iPads on music stands, shot on Xiaomi 360 camera (Mi Sphere 2018), varying durations

**Revolution, 2025** Multi-screen video, shot on iPhone 8, varying durations

**Fall and rise, 2025** 360 VR, shot on Xiaomi 360 camera (Mi Sphere 2018), 5.27mins

**Near and far, 2025** 360 VR, shot on Xiaomi 360 camera (Mi Sphere 2018), 4.17mins

**Wall works, 2025** Archival prints, 1320mm x 710mm

All works POA

#### Working on location

All works were made from footage/audio recordings captured in and around the city of Kronstadt on Kotlin Island, during a month-long artist residency – in October 2018 – hosted by National Centre for Contemporary Art, St. Petersburg, Russia. We decided to travel with discrete, mobile recording technologies as it seemed the best way to work in an unknown environment, in public places and unsure of how local authorities would respond.

VH & FK

To access the AR (Augmented Reality) teaser for *Place of Anchors* you can either scan the QR code or go to the link below.



[www.placeofanchors.com](http://www.placeofanchors.com)

VR and AR design and production by **Sarah Cashman**, graphic and multi-media designer  
<https://www.sarahcashman.com/>

Thank you  
John Tonkin • Nick Boerma • Sarah and family • Helen Grace • Mikhael Krest

vimeo/soundcloud **virginia hilyard**  
vimeo **fiona kemp**

exhibition catalogue **jane richens + brian doherty**

cover image **Якорная площадь [Anchor Square]**

#### Grace Cossington Smith Gallery

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