



Above: Kongsvinger Fortress at night, showing bell and the flagpole which marked the zero meridian. Below: outside of the gunpowder room. Right: installation of Maia Urstad's *Nullmeridianens tilbakekomst*



## Nullmeridianens Tilbakekomst Return of the Zero Meridian *Maia Urstad*

For more than 60 years (1779-1840s), Norway's prime meridian was marked by a flagpole at Kongsvinger Fortress, in a small town situated 100 km north-east of Oslo. This location on the periphery and the flagpole became the origin for the first topographical maps in Norway. The place of the prime meridian was then moved to the Oslo Observatory (and run by Oslo University) during the 1840s, before its final relocation to Greenwich in 1884, when the world established a single common prime meridian for longitude and mean time (GMT). While prime and zero are used in English to describe a meridian, in Norwegian we tend only to refer to a zero meridian.

In this work, I have moved the meridian back to "zero" in Kongsvinger, creating or pointing to this nearly forgotten history, in the shape of an illuminated circular

brass disc measuring 65 cm in diameter. The disc is centrally located on the floor of the fortress' gunpowder house and a sound work is played from the ceiling where local sounds encounter sound fragments from other parts of the world. Where the military had originally discovered the benefits of accurate map surveying, I now draw my own sound map based on the same meridian.

### ASSIGNMENT

In state-owned buildings in Norway, 0.5-1.5% of the construction budget is allocated to art projects according to certain criteria. The Norwegian Armed Forces are exempt from this legislation but they have developed the same model through a separate agreement with KORO/ Public Art Norway at Kongsvinger Fortress. My brief was to create a site-specific artwork relating to the concepts of time, storytelling and memories. Since the mid-1980s, I have worked in the intersection between auditory-visual arts. My works are often based on different aspects of our technological development and the traces and stories

we leave behind. A sound installation in a gunpowder room from 1684 in Kongsvinger Fortress was, for me, a very exciting assignment. Based on its history – a centre that became a periphery – the main challenge was: how can I bring “*the big world*” into this little room, melting “*there*” with “*here*” and “*then*” alongside “*now*”?

### KONGSVINGER FORTRESS

Kongsvinger is a small town with a population of about 12,000 inhabitants. The fortress is a landmark on a hill overlooking the town. With a history dating back to the 1600s, it ceased to operate as a military site around 1900. In 2009, it was revived as a “*fortress of culture*”. Almost the entire fortress area is open to the public but the opening of the installation in the Spring 2016 will be the first time that this building, “*little gunpowder house*” has public access.

### THE INSTALLATION

The little gunpowder house is well suited for a site-specific permanent sound installation and I was instantly enamoured with it. It is built in stone with a vaulted ceiling. Its thick outer walls keep outside noise at bay and this secures for a sound art piece its own identity, while the audience is offered an isolated, contemplative experience. The room is small – about 25 sq.m – with many fine details. Time has left its mark on the walls and daylight spills delicately in through a small narrow window. A new entrance in concrete provides a nice touch between the old and the new. This concrete rectangle is a new element that edges the room away from the purely historical and provides scope for an encounter between past and present. The only artificial light supplied is a source illuminating the brass disc. The disc thus acts as a light reflector.

The installation consists of 8 loudspeakers – 6 small ceiling mounted and 2 bass speakers on the ground. As a visual focal point, the returning prime meridian, is the circular brass disc situated in the centre of the room. The speakers are placed so that the room has three listening zones – one in the middle of the room around the brass disc and one in each of the room’s corners where the bass loudspeakers are also located.

The sounds are based on audio recordings from the fortress, sounds that have always been there – the wind, the clang of a rope lanyard against the flagpole, the canon

salute and ringing bells. The local sounds constitute the bulk of the composition, interspersed with sounds from other parts of the world, recordings made on my travels, such as a song from a minaret, from a bar in Marrakech, and also a news broadcast announcing how North Korea changed its time by half an hour. The bell in the yard, which was used to indicate the time and signal when something was about to happen, is the basis of the composition. It is played on all the loudspeakers, while new sounds first enter the room via a loudspeaker closest to the door, before eventually establishing themselves with the local sounds in the loudspeakers situated in the centre of the room. The big world – the exotic and far away – changes the room and mingles with the sounds that have always been part of the fortress – like the minaret from Ramallah and the wind in Kongsvinger – together charging the room in new ways and allowing for multiple layers of association. The familiar and the unfamiliar merge together in a new soundscape that reflects some of our reality in today’s world.

**This work is a permanent sound installation at Kongsvinger Fortress, Norway and will open in Spring 2016. The piece was commissioned by KORO / Public Art Norway in conjunction with The Norwegian Armed Forces and the art consultant for the project was Trond Hugo Haugen.**