

# RIGA DATING AGENCY: ART, INTIMACY, AND NARRATIVES OF FEMALE AGENCY IN POST-SOVIET LATVIA

Inga Untiks

*York University*

The legacy of Anna Lācis has been overdetermined by considerations of her personal life, with her historiography thoroughly enmeshed in the scholarly study of Walter Benjamin. While these representations have ensured that there was at least some understanding of her life and work outside of Latvia, the emphasis on the “personal” (as represented and interpreted by and in relation to others) relies on forms of performance and translation that reinforce a gendered body politic to which women from Eastern Europe are too often subjected. As this volume contributes to the historical narrativization of Anna Lācis from the perspective of Latvia, we need to consider how the historicization of Eastern European female figures such as Lācis continues to affect and be affected by gendered determinations, in particular in the artistic practice in the region, which is my focus here. Art has played an important role in challenging gender norms and ethnic differences in Eastern Europe and has often been on the forefront of social critique.<sup>1</sup> As Latvian and Eastern European women continue to be represented, translated and located in gendered narratives of East-West dynamics, the urgency to make the modes of mediation visible becomes more pressing.

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Contemporary art in the Baltic Sea region in the 1990s explored issues of gender in various ways as the perspective of women as both subject and artist increased in prominence. Artistic experiments played a prominent role in evolving discussions of post-Soviet identity on both individual and collective levels, and some turned to the reappropriation and reinvention of histories and identities, which in turn reinforced social, economic, and political discourses. The reemergence of a conservative nationalist sentiment reaffirmed, and confronted women with, the stubbornly patriarchal nature of nostalgic ethnocentrism. Artists in the 1990s had to navigate a new and complex socioeconomic landscape of gendered notions of normative ethnonationalist love.

Extended artistic initiatives such as the *Riga Dating Agency* sought to make visible the gender dynamics of mediated representations of Eastern European women, in which women are presented as commodified heteronormative objects of desire in a form that conceals and restricts their agency. As the following analysis of *Riga Dating Agency* and two contrasting pieces, Estonian Kai Kaljo's *A Loser* and the *LN Women's League*, reveals, these art works invite discussion as multilayered yet problematic sites that construct gender and ethnicity in terms that allow for reflection on the process by which Lācis came to be known as Benjamin's "Latvian Bolshevik girlfriend" (see Ingram).

104 The premise of the *Riga Dating Agency* was simple. Initiated by recognized Latvian artists Monika Pormale and Gints Gabrans under the name *The Riga Acquaintance Office*, the locally based pseudodating agency was launched in 1997 as a performative gesture culminating in the display of portraits of their clients in various European exhibition spaces. The emphasis in this project on personal relationships, on the search for heteronormative love, makes visible the dynamics by which Latvian women are typically represented. Participants were "recruited" by Pormale and Gabrans in the same manner as "real" dating agencies at the time: advertisements were placed in local newspapers and on posters across the city in both Latvian and Russian. The women, and the few men, who responded were brought to meet the artists for a brief discussion and were asked to complete a brief questionnaire not atypical of contemporary dating websites and matchmaking services. Data such as age, weight, and eye colour were collected, as were brief personal statements of their interests and desires intended to provide insight into their lives, all of which were later translated into English.<sup>2</sup> To complete their portfolios, the participants were provided access to makeup professionals and stylists for their glamour-shot-style portraits photographed by Pormale and Gabrans, in which they pose with coy smiles, provocative stances and careful sartorial choices, making the participants complicit in the representation of their image and demeanour. There is a clearly inherent performance of femininity in the portraits captured by Pormale and Gabrans, which reveals, not a critical exploration of gender and identity, but rather the self-idealization of the participants. It is a demonstrative performance of East European womanhood on an intimate level, mediated by the artists and intended for an international art world audience.

The *Riga Dating Agency* evolved in various iterations. In the first regional exhibitions, the posed portraits were printed and displayed in passport-photo format, underscoring the alien pedigree of the women. Subsequent exhibitions expanded the portraits into life-sized images supported on cardboard, which corresponded precisely to the person's actual measurements. With their determined stances blown up to fill gallery spaces, the effect on the audience was one of recognition of these representations as authentic beings, yet also recognition of their two-dimensionality as flat images with nothing behind them. They were commodified representations that, despite the accompanying translated biographical data, generated an atmosphere of detachment and voyeurism on the part of the audience.

The participants in the project included an overwhelming majority of women, with a disproportionate number of ethnic Russians responding at a rate of 95%. The overwhelming percentage of ethnically Russian women who participated and were displayed contradicted the predominating ethnonationalist ideals of the late 1990s and early 2000s in the region and accentuated the sociocultural and economic disparities in contemporary Riga. At a historical crossroads of East and West, the ethnic complexities of the citizens of Riga, as placed on display across Europe, are in stark contrast to the dominating discourse of Latvia as a fully Westernized nation.

In their supporting artists' statements, Pormale and Gabrans lament the fact that the relatively small population of Riga and the limited socioeconomic mobility of the participants were significant factors motivating the women to participate. While some participants noted in their personal statements that they wished to remain in Riga, they nevertheless remained open to the potential opportunity to "widen the pool" in all its forms (Pormale 96). The position of ethnically Russian women in Latvia during the late 1990s and early 2000s was one of instability and often limited social, cultural, and economic opportunity, which was magnified by Latvia's application to join the European Union, which it did in 2004. A central feature of Latvian EU integration was the issue of minority rights and citizenship for the demographically significant ethnic Russian population. Historically the largest minority population, the number of ethnic Russians in Latvia increased significantly during the period of Soviet occupation, particularly in urban and industrial centres such as Riga. Following the declaration on the restoration of national independence on May 4, 1990, the Republic of Latvia did not automatically grant citizenship to all previously recognized Soviet citizens, instead requiring demonstrable knowledge of Latvian language and history in order to gain citizenship. As a result, by 2016, two-thirds of the ethnically Russian population in Latvia (11.7% of the total population) remained non-citizens (*nepilsoni*), a unique designation that disallows certain civil rights, including the vote, and is incorporated into unique passport agreements with both Schengen and Russia.<sup>3</sup> Stukuls notes that, in comparison to Estonia and Lithuania, a comparatively low proportion of ethnic Latvians were living in Latvia: in 1997, they were estimated to make up only 56 percent of the population. She further considers the roots of economic disparity and the resulting effects of gender and ethnic identity (548, 550, 552).

Ethnic Russian women living in Latvia faced severe challenges in the already difficult transition to a capitalist economy. Their lack of language ability and shortfall of skills problematize earnest readings of the *Riga Dating Agency*, including those by the artists, based solely on love and desire. In the 1990s, economic hardship, and not only on the part of ethnic Russian women, led to a massive expansion of the sex business: "In 1995 in Riga, there were over 500 known bordellos, sex clubs, and other establishments offering sexual services," each typically employing between fourteen and fifty women (Stukuls 548), not to mention endless ads in both Latvian- and Russian-language newspapers. Artist's statements by Pormale in English-language texts such

as Aleksandra Mir's collection *Corporate Mentality* gloss over the commodification of these women's bodies and fail to directly address the more paramount issue of the differential relationship between gender and ethnic identity in Latvia in the 1990s.

106 With the return of ethnonationalist narratives in the immediate post-transition years and the limited legal status of a measure of the population, the position of ethnic Russian women in Latvia was limited, and the participants' desire for connection beyond Riga of little surprise. At the project's peak, over 120 participants were involved, while the artists estimate approximately 200 dating agencies were operating in Riga in 1997. Tellingly, the locations selected by Pormale and Gabrans for exhibition skewed the geographical axis of the *Riga Dating Agency* in a decided direction. Displaying this project, and these women, in galleries in Stockholm, Berlin, Athens and Rome, the participants were mapped onto a particular imagination of an audience that was Westernized, financially prosperous, and educated in English, the lingua franca of the international art world. Unsurprisingly, given the Western orientation of the Baltic art world, the images of these ethnically Russian Latvian women were not displayed in galleries in Moscow or St. Petersburg, nor were their statements kept in their native Russian. Instead, the representations of these women were mediated and translated, curated and packaged for the consumption of the European urban centres of the international art world.

The disproportionate use of the English language in the international contemporary art world is indicative of the dominating capitalist forces that prioritize the proclivities of the global art market, to which Latvian artists were particularly subject due to the poorly developed local art market in the Baltic region. Internationally, institutional and curatorial interest in the theme of identity created an appetite for ethnic and national specificity, where the demonstration of alterity in the expanded Europe was of particular interest and frequently relied on stereotypical assumptions of Eastern Europeanness. These orientaling tendencies reinforced a West-East axis as centre-periphery, resulting in a dynamic that maps West-Centre-Male in opposition to East-Peripheral-Female in historicized narrative legacies and situates the subjects of the *Riga Dating Agency* in triple isolation. Any agency they have is distilled into their personal and intimate status, represented and mediated according to the conceptual typology with which Pormale and Gabrans experiment. There is, therefore, an irony in the use of the word "agency" in the *Riga Dating Agency*, whose participants' limited access was mediated and translated by others.

That Lācis came to be known as Benjamin's "Latvian Bolshevik girlfriend" shows that this typology is not limited to the post-Soviet realm. However, while Lācis herself lived in a society that provided her with opportunities to resist the bourgeois family model to which the subjects of the *Riga Dating Agency* aspired, namely Soviet Latvia, her reputation in both the West and in post-Soviet Latvia has nevertheless been bound up in the dynamics of power and dominance of the East-Periphery-Female axis.<sup>4</sup>

Readings of gender dynamics and their alliance with traditional feminine and

masculine discourses are historically (re)produced in accordance with the needs, priorities, and values of national continuity. During the early years of Latvian national independence in the 1990s, ethnonational gender normative narratives were particularly pronounced, and the reemergence of conservative nationalist perspectives during the period of an awakening of a traditional nationalist sentiment reaffirmed the patriarchal nature of nostalgic ethnocentrism. Just as Lācis was criticized for her role as mother in her daughter's 1996 autobiography (Ķimele and Strautmane), for some Latvians, the ethnically Russian participants in the *Riga Dating Agency* were also read as seemingly unsuitable motherhood figures in service of the ethnonationalist transformation narratives of the 1990s.

As the masculine has come to symbolize national heroics, in Latvia and elsewhere, the feminine has been appropriated to represent the reproduction of the nation and to bear symbolic values, a perspective supported by both Sharp and Stukuls: for Sharp, "women appear in national imagery as symbols of nation or symbolic bearers of it, such as mothers" (101), and for Stukuls, in "Latvian nationalism women are held to be the bearers of the nation and, hence, are valued primarily as mothers" (539). In Latvia, we can point to the literary and cultural tradition of the glorification of women such as Anna Brigadere and Milda, and the complex parallels of the personal and professional in the relationship between Latvian literary heroes Aspazija and Rainis.<sup>5</sup> If women were not the right kind of "producers" in service of the ethnonational project, they were alterity, and therefore available for consumption in service of the Central-Male dynamic. The ethnically Russian Latvian women of the *Riga Dating Agency* do not correspond to the required ethnonational narrative, while Lācis, although ethnically Latvian, challenged the bourgeois ethnonationalist priorities of the nation that governed the international academic and artistic worlds with her communist ideology, and was therefore similarly contained and most frequently situated within her relationship to Benjamin.

The challenge Lācis represented to the "mother figure" assumption is made visible in the 2014 film *Māra* (dir. Krista Burāne). The film is a hybrid creative-documentary exploring the sacrifices of personal life and choices to gain creative advancement. The narrative considers the story of Lācis's granddaughter Māra Ķimele, the distinguished Latvian theatre director, and explores the difficult relationship that Ķimele had with her famed grandmother, as well as with her own son Peteris. Throughout the film, Lācis's resentment of her role as a mother figure and her resistance to nurturing is foregrounded, punctuating her personal life with professional concerns and reinscribing creativity and agency, while at the same time drawing attention to the forces that prevent her from having been depicted as an equal agent in her own right.<sup>6</sup>

This link of the personal and the represented has been a trajectory of interest in the previous works of both Pormale and Gabrans. Pormale's projects have frequently sought out locations of human connection and intimacy, for example, her work as the stage designer for *Latviesu Mīlestību* (*Latvian Love*, 2006) at the New Riga Theatre, which explored the personal events and fantasies of the actors, and

*May You Live Forever in Latvia*, a play on the words *Tev Muzam Dzivot Latvija* (*May You Live Forever, Latvia*, 2015) that shifts the emphasis from location to nation, thus politicizing and critiquing various modes of citizenship. *May You Live Forever in Latvia* consisted of a series of photographs of Latvians living abroad in New York, London and Paris and explored the motives of expats choosing to live in different environments. In contrast, the work of Gints Gabrans has commented on the theme of media manipulation. In *Starix* (2004), this appraisal took the form of a transformation of a man on the margins of society into a media star with a pseudonym. As a destitute man living in Riga, Starix was given a physical makeover and was socially introduced into, and subsequently celebrated in, the discriminating world of Latvian media. These past projects and the *Riga Dating Agency* consistently raise the issue of personal agency and the role of the artists' subjects as active agents in the production of their futures, fates, and representations. With a focus on socioeconomic circumstance and its effects on real live bodies, the question always remains: who controls

**108** access to the narrative?

As Pormale and Gabrans contributed to the construction of their participants' particular narratives in the *Riga Dating Agency*, in Latvia's neighbour Estonia, artists such as Kai Kaljo strove to communicate aspects of their own narratives directly, if only to illuminate particular facets of their circumstances. Estonia emerged at the forefront of feminist activity in the Baltic region, and the self-image of female artists and the representation of their subjects assumed new prominence with various modes of performativity gaining traction. Representing a democratization of art practice due to its material accessibility for artists, performative modes such as temporal actions, photography, and particularly video were used to articulate the private personal lives of women as part of a greater concern for everyday life in contemporary art. Many turned themselves into the subjects of their works, including, notably, Mare Tralla, Ene-Liis Semper, and Kai Kaljo.

Kaljo's work in particular is striking as an example of a singular female representation of East(ern) identity to the West(ern) audience. In the video *A Loser* (1997), released the same year as the *Riga Dating Agency*, Kaljo speaks in Estonian with her words subtitled in English:

Hi, my name is Kai Kaljo. I am an Estonian artist.  
 My weight is 92 kg.  
 I am 37 years of age but still living with my mother.  
 I am working at the Estonian Academy of Art as a teacher for \$80 a month.  
 I think the most important thing about being an artist is freedom.  
 I am very happy.

The relevance of these statements is twofold: first, Kaljo's words are spoken in Estonian yet directed to an international audience, thereby satisfying the contemporary art world's desires for national specificity and for alterity while placating the necessity of translation. In articulating her personal biography in her native language, her performance is akin to the modes of self-representation of the *Riga Dating*

Agency project, yet without the intermediary translation efforts of another artist. She speaks for herself honestly in her own language, yet the interpretation of her statements by the audience is dependent on their articulation in the English language. Second, her statements focus on the physical, material, and economic, with only a brief yet poignant suggestion of her marital status, in “I am 37 years of age but still living with my mother,” negating the appetite for further questions about her romantic life. Kaljo’s work thus discloses a level of cynicism that the *Riga Dating Agency* and other Latvian works of the period lack, and indeed suggests an acknowledgement of post-Soviet social tourism and the West’s curiosity of, and assumptions about, a previously isolated region.

In the same year as the initial launch of the *Riga Dating Agency* and *A Loser*, the multifaceted art project *The LN Women’s League* provides an interesting point of contrast as an example of a feminist intervention in which the artists make conventional narratives visible far more directly than the aforementioned projects. The *LN Women’s League Project* was curated by Inga Steimane and included five ethnic Latvian women artists: Ingrida Zabera, Ilze Breidaka, Kristine Keire, Izolda Cesniece, and Silja Pogule. In reaction to what they regarded as the “aggressive and sexist traditions” of Anglo-American and French feminist thought, their “projects ‘perform’ femininity” (Panting 6), with the artists asserting the right to play with notions of femininity in service of ethnonational transformational narratives and the gendering of cultural stereotypes. For example, in *Saruna Rezultati (Results of the Conversation, 1999)*, they caricature themselves as “vixens or sirens” (Dimitrakaki et al. 179), presenting themselves as a uniform group of constructed female power that is critical of feminine infantile behaviour and male oppression (Panting 6). In *Negotiations (1999)*, they occupied the Riga Stock Exchange for a week, and each night invited an “influential” local “businessmens” to be their guest for dinner. Their identikit fashions played against the formal business attire worn by their guests with the adherent perceived power of dominating masculinity, yet the affect renders the men comical, absurd, and even powerless against the agency of the feminine (Panting 7), showing up the representatives of patriarchal constructs as subjected to the basest bodily desires.

The *LN Women’s League Project*, not unlike the *Riga Dating Agency*, brings into focus issues of modes of femininity in service of, and in opposition to, the ethnonational. Yet it largely dismisses the systematic economic subjugation of Eastern European women that, in Latvia, was further exacerbated by stringent frameworks that limited socioeconomic mobility and frequently determined the personal circumstances and relationships pursued by women. Interpretations of both projects by the artists themselves are provided with a knowing wink towards alterity—gendered and ethnic—yet both the works and the artists fail to speak directly to the systematic ethnonational power structures at play. In subsequent interviews, the artists are certainly not cynical and are perhaps overly benevolent, which further reinforces existing power structures while avoiding the systematic roots of ethnogendered

disparity; I should add that this was not uncommon at the time. Amid the debates initiated in the 1990s and still ongoing over the rights of ethnic minority citizens, the proportional overrepresentation of non-ethnic-Latvian women in the *Riga Dating Agency* contributes to the ambivalence of local and international audience reception with whom the work broadly failed to resonate, and perhaps even the relative ambivalence on these topics by the artists themselves. Who has agency and who does not? Who benefits in these transactions? These are all mutually entered “relationships” and aspirational partnerships with their own structural dynamics and narratives, sometimes complicated by love.

The critical thread remains the narrative legacies through which these relations are determined, interpreted, and dependent on ethnonormative nationalist narratives. In the same way that the *Riga Dating Agency* participants have been subsumed in art history by their body politics and defined by the interpretation of Pormale and Gabrans, Lācis’s legacy has been subsumed by Benjamin’s, although volumes such as **110** this make strides in making Lācis visible as a woman of agency beyond the legacy of her personal life. Sadly, the artists of the *Riga Dating Agency* failed to follow up with their “clients,” so we do not know the fates of these women (Pormale 96). In the age of SnapChat, Tinder, and web-based translation tools, the modes of self-representation have changed, and so too will the narratives that we generate.

## NOTES

1. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful guidance and suggestions.
2. See Pormale’s statement on the *Riga Dating Agency* in *Corporate Mentality*, in which she describes some participants expressing their desire in poetry, intimate preferences as well as sociocultural positioning (Pormale 96).
3. See the Latvian Institute’s Fact Sheet about Russians in Latvia: [www.li.lv](http://www.li.lv).
4. In “The Porous Coupling of Walter Benjamin and Asja Lācis,” Justine McGill reflects that “Lācis is typecast [in history] as a dangerous femme fatale, and Benjamin as a man whose libido has overcome all higher functions” (67).
5. Aspazija (1865-1943) and Janis Rainis (1865-1929) were both actively involved in Latvian literary life and politics and are credited with creating a sense of Latvian identity: “Aspazija had become acquainted with Janis Pliksans, pen-name ‘Janis Rainis’, the editor-in-chief of the progressive newspaper *Dienas Lapa* (*Daily Paper*).” He became Aspazija’s partner in life and work, and in 1897, Aspazija and Rainis got married, after which “Aspazija was still recognized as an outstanding literary figure in Latvian culture. However, she was increasingly perceived as the second half—the Muse of Rainis” (Novikova 39).
6. The phrase “objects-not-agents of change” is frequently used in discussions of East-Central European feminism, but is most directly traced to its use by Posadskaya (170-71).



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