

Dreams for real! Monica Pormale & Gints Gabrans by Kaspars Vanagas

Contemporary culture, including the arts, has been accused of producing signs as a product. The art project "Riga Dating Agency", produced by Monika I. Pormale and Gints Gabrans, neatly avoids this debate by transferring the focus from the production of commodities to the provision of services. The artists have put posters in the streets of Riga and advertisements in newspapers calling on local residents who want to meet a foreigner for more or less "serious purposes", and to do so with the help of international art exhibitions and foreign art galleries. Foreigners who visit these galleries, in turn, are being offered a chance to find art with which one can fall in love.

The photographs of women (yes, only women – no men responded to the call) which are displayed in the exhibitions, however, cause most viewers to ask, "Is it for real?" The question here focuses not so much on the fictive status of the dating agency as on the women themselves. It's the "synthetic" perfection of the woman's image – an image which under the flashbulb shines like lip gloss or glitter on the emphasised cheekbones of a woman who has done some serious dieting, like the glossy cover of a magazine. Even the bodies of the women seem to be presented in the poses of fashion models, as if they were cast from a mould, allowing us only to guess at the effort which it took to get the women into those poses. The body, which here is supposed to serve as nothing more than a medium for visual communication so as to represent the individuality of the individual, in fact tells a very different story. The individuality here is shaped by the flesh, to which the everyday regime and the intended future life model of the specific person are subordinated. The photographs have obvious parallels to the mannerisms of advertising and the fashion industry, but the artists say that they did not force their models to behave that way – the

women themselves said that they wanted to behave that way, allowing us only to sense the range of complicated manipulations through which the body becomes a battle-ground for those structures which attribute to the body a prestige of semiotic nature, offering to improve it, not only promising to create new personas, but actually doing so. Not new personas, really – new types of personas.

Gints Gabrans and Monika I. Pormale are two young artists who appeared on the scene in the mid-1990s, when Latvia's society was slowly coming to understand the essence of socioeconomic and political changes that were occurring at that time. The banal idea of the fall of the Iron Curtain allowed people to arrive at the idea of the world as a unified whole and of society as a global civilisation. Who are the members of this civilisation, what are the mechanisms by which it is regulated? The efforts of young artists towards self-identification cannot automatically be compared to "social art". That would be unfair. Rather, we are dealing here with experiments in which artists look at changes in themselves and others, analyse the mechanisms of public control, and seek guarantees for the ability of public thought to make judgements. "Is it for real?" is a question which can be applied to anything that has fallen under the artist's gaze, because at every moment it remains fully possible that in the new consumer society that has emerged, a belief in the identity of things is nothing more than the result of false semiotic manipulations.

Here it is worth noting a few of Gints Gabrans's works. The laconic installation "Everything Happens in the Head" (1999), for instance, showed an inflatable sex doll with a wide-open mouth, attached to the wall of the exhibition hall at hip level. He also produced a series of experimental films under the auspices of the "Home tv" project. For several

years he watched the soap operas that are shown on Latvia's television channels, recorded fragments of them and reedited them according to his own script. "Because TV is based on advertising, TV must take care of its viewers," he said. "That is why in its essence it wants its revenge against people who are critical of it or who oppose it. The human image which runs parallel to this consumerism is shaped as being evil. Commonly, for example, artists and scientists are presented as maniacal or disturbed individuals who are murderers, to boot. They are the heroes of my films."

The question "Is it for real?" is also the focus of another work of art by Gints Gabrans. The installation "Short Circuit" (1995) involved the placement of bare wire in the electrical sockets of the exhibition hall. Whether there was really any current in those sockets is a question which applies less to the installation itself than it does to the respect which artistic institutions have for their audiences. To what extent is an art gallery prepared to offer an adventure that upsets our assumption that art is relatively differentiated from the rest of reality? A similar positioning is found in the "Riga Dating Service" project, only here the artists are concretely claiming that everything is happening. The women are waiting for your e-mail and your letters. Shall we write? Or shall we fear another short circuit?

Fear is understandable. It is easier to accept the idea of a global society in theoretical than in practical terms, and the "Riga Dating Service" seems to be toying with the politically correct desire of Westerners not to see anything bad in the fact that an Eastern European woman might want to meet a foreigner for purposes of marriage. Immanuel Kant, in "Perpetual Peace", expressed the idea that democracy cannot exist in a single region, because the main condition for its existence is a unified, global society. Let's not, however, get involved in a discussion of democracy; let's look at the modern world, which today is so often paired

with the word "global". If Westerners suspect that the true motivation of the women who are presented in the "Riga Dating Service" project is a yearning for well-being, then this points both to the split that exists in present-day Europe and to the unity of the continent. The unity lies in ideas which are based on the model of fortune that is typical of the consumer society – a model which is usually and unilaterally interpreted as enjoyment, or at least as a good mood. The women in the photo portraits seem eagerly to be demonstrating their ability to deal with both the one and the other. It is precisely here – in the idea that welfare might be more appropriate for some than for others – that we find the disruptive nature of Europe. Let's be frank here – the sex appeal of the women in these portraits seems mildly indecent only because it stands in crass contrast to the ethnic charm of the ideas which many Westerners hold about Eastern Europe. It is a place where rural babushkas worthy of Marquez live alongside Bosnian refugees wrapped in shawls and the widows of Russian submarine sailors dressed in second-hand clothes. Susan Sontag first pointed to the Eurocentric assumption that African women have an easier time in dealing with the death of a child than Western women do, and this idea can just as well be applied to Europe itself – although in this case we have to talk about attitudes towards life, not towards death.

So how do the heroines of this project perceive life? The questionnaires from the dating agency offer, if not a complete, then at least an easily surveyed response. Judging from advertisements in the foreign press, moreover, their outlook is very much the same as that of their Western partners. We're surprised at the similarity of the hobbies which they list – the emphasis is on cooking, movies and horse-back riding. When they talk about their preferred partners, the compatibility of Zodiac signs dominates. In talking about themselves, the women most often mention their

body measurements and the color of their eyes. The most vivid element of commonality in the questionnaires, though, is probably their universal confidence in the idea that happiness is a quality of the future.

In order to avoid misuse of information which has been presented freely, I will replace it with a description of a previous work produced by Monika I. Pormale. She had a personal exhibition, "Faust", in an enormous museum hall. It was arranged as a passive but interactive art installation, allowing the visitor to spend some time in Heaven. Those who entered the room were overtaken by an all-encompassing hallucination – endless lines of clouds and an infinite, dappled field of blue. Nothing more. The exhibition was open all night on New Year's Eve, and people could await the New Year there. An acquaintance of mine who was there said that for the first time in her life, she did not wish for anything at the New Year. Not because there wasn't anything that could be wanted. She simply understood that happiness is transparent.

Perhaps the same can be said about love?