



Suspense

The rituals gone wrong

This exhibition was first put together according to rather mathematical rules. The set of four was one of the departure points that were marked out by the organisers of the show – apollonia, european art exchanges (Strasbourg).

Four is a difficult number – just because it is overused and has a feel of ambitiousness. There are four cornerstones, four cardinal points, four elements and seasons and four kinds of cards and so on. And alike the directions at the usual crossroads the archetypical “four” is rather indicating the disunity and looseness – some basic elements that are far from being centred. Therefore, partly paying respect to the distinct characters of the artists in this exhibition and the in-between space that is created by the tension among their works, the exhibition is titled “Suspense”.

Gints Gabrans

Next level

Installation lumineuse / Light installation, 2005

Still the title is intended to carry further also the sub-theme for the "four" – the veiled obsession of this frequent number. There are hints of custom and obsession in every artist's part in the exhibition. The tension of the show is built up by its guiding theme – unsteady balance of the daily routine on the fragile edge of emotional and mental overload. Keeping in mind that these Latvian artists are contemporaries sharing similar cultural backgrounds and life within neo-liberal conditions one could speculate about the origins of the rhythm, ritual and breakdown of routine marking their works. Poetics of Eriks Bozis, Katrina Neiburga, Kaspars Podnieks draws close to the protestant ethics and glorification of labour and the sensual, psychological experiences of satisfaction and struggle deep under the system of the travail. The fourth artist – Gints Gabrans' latest œuvre too circles around the seemingly familiar phenomenon of light, metaphysical subtexts and popular beliefs and superstitions generated by the light-waves and rules of physics.

To continue with numbers – the second request for the exhibition was division in two – in two generations. It has been fulfilled with a slight hesitation and this sequence is apparent only if one keeps in mind that "generationalist" approach to the recent works in Latvian art is reflecting the transitory speed of changing society in Latvia of the last fifteen years. The changes of the art-scene, technical means, educational framework, informal hangouts and politically and market determined demands of the international scene has compressed the generation gap down to 5-6 years. Not being much sought for from the beginning, this distinction can nevertheless be traced in the show. Artists whose practice began at the mid-nineties – Gints Gabrans and Eriks Bozis – are displaying conceptual object-based works where expressiveness is reached by a flash of the idea, ironic hint, precise metaphor. Media in their work is rather a tool and not the main means of expression as it appears in works of the artists who stepped on the scene around the millennium break – Katrina Neiburga and Kaspars Podnieks. Different in their interests but having similar education under supervision of one of the key figures of "Latvian avant-garde" – Ojars Petersons – these young artists use digital imagery and performance action to convey a narrative or evoke a poetic situation.

The four artists in the show share nearly nothing that would eventually disclose any similarities and that would link their methods, subject

matter or ideas. Each work in the exhibition is a result of very autonomous creative quests and developments within artistic practice. Each of them has gained recognition in Latvia and abroad, and it makes this small and static group exhibition even more “suspended” phenomenon. In fact, the sequence of artworks in the “Suspense” might as well be traced just in order of oppositions – like *Press! Press! Press!* as opposed to *Water Memory* as opposed to *Milk* and so on. Therefore “Suspense” is contradicting the procedure of a thematic show and rather marking a grid of strains between the artworks. These lines become more interesting if we question the emergence of these oppositions: what drives as different artists as they are, of about the same historic time-scale, to dig up the poetics of the palpable everyday occurrences – technological routine (Bozis, Neiburga), abstract materiality of the countryside (Podnieks), psychical effects of lights (Gabrans)?

One could relate the themes surrounding this question to the project of political and social u-turn and reconstruction of the ideas of nation that are upgraded in Latvia since 1990 – the time of the regain of the state independence. Affiliation of “Suspense” with this project is plainly stated by the context of the show – its creation within the “Étonnante Lettonie”¹ festival – presentation of the Latvian culture in France initiated by the governments of two countries. The artworks are giving the two-fold mapping of the contemporary state of the Latvian self-reflection: one is indicating contemporary dominance of capitalism and information society, with its universal protestant logic of the production/consumption and efficient impersonal organisation of labour and leisure; the other is re-reading the conservative cultural symbols that are adding identity to the current society – linking it with the historic prototype – the first period of national state in the pre-war period, including the religious practices and ethnic myths. It means that all the artworks displayed in the show are based on careful revisionism of the eclectic contemporary culture. Their reading pre-supposes multiple references linking the individual experience and the social place. In a curious way “Suspense” seems to take hold of the several conventions that since mid-19th century are escorting Latvian national self identification – diligence, sensitivity to cyclical rhythm of life, ritualism and sentiment for calm aesthetic beauty. “Suspense” might display these antiquated (but still promoted) “virtues”, yet the hyperbole (sometimes irony) behind the artworks is spoiling their innocence.

What happens if we start to read these themes along the opposition lines within "Suspense"?

The most fascinating for the ethnic exploration is the oeuvre of Kaspars Podnieks. This young author finds the setting of his works in his family farmstead in the countryside. The photos of *Milk* build up the positive pole of the show, as pictures containing "500 l of milk, its author a farmer, a calf, a milker and a children tricycle, a camera and the author, an artist" are the most direct and material pieces in the show. There is no lasting tradition of the staged photography in Latvian art nor there is one for the kinetic installation – another direction of Kaspars' work. He consistently imposes his abstracting vision of colour and material on the rural Latvian landscape, still constitutive part of the local identity. Just keeping in mind that the Latvian National Museum of Art still attempts to classify contemporary art by genres like "still life" or "landscape", Kaspars' work appears as the unintended link between the stiffened eye of traditionalists and contemporary language. Kaspars Podnieks reads the scene of forest as room with abstraction of sounds, he physically paints and overlays the colour fields upon trees and pastures as a vibrant unorthodox heir of the rigid land-art. His works are combining the physicality of the "real" process of execution and the fragile emotional poetics that unexpectedly conquers the traces of physical efforts. The film *Milkman* marks his shift towards unrest – with irrational expressivity cuts through the harmonies of the other irrational but balanced works.

Katrina Neiburga is another distinct name in the Latvian art of the last years – as opposed to Podnieks she is focused on the urbanity and narratives hidden in the personal stories and media channels of the urban folk. Like Kaspars Podnieks traces constant, suspended, still duration, Katrina follows the dynamics of process. As Kaspars, she sets out for an action – but her activities are performance investigations resembling the anthropological research in recent human history and including elements of staging. Process is a constitutive part of the resulting presentation. Katrina constantly returns to self-examination, observation of the roles ascribed to her by her family or society, and therefore to her femininity. The self-projection is strongly manifesting itself in her work *Spamatrex* presented in this exhibition. Leading the viewer into the domain of obsession the 5 minutes long video reveals the out-of-control market of pure desire, wishes of self improvement and



Eriks Bozis
Press! Press! Press!, 2003

enjoyment and their sale mechanisms that are colonising the efficient channels of information and, subsequently, minds. The lyrics of the song are borrowed exclusively from the spammed e-mail of the artist. The work discloses Katrina's affiliation with multimedia and sonic-scapes that keeps developing from her first experimental VJ-ing sessions at Riga electronic music events of the late 90's. Her works include not just films, installations, multimedia performances, but also stage design for the opera performances. Katrina's main medium remains digital video that is often complementing other techniques – graphics, installations. Determined examination of herself and her surroundings, provoking performativity and empiric-documentalism points to the individualism of this artist in Latvian art scene.

The cross of *Press! Press! Press!* could well serve as a wicked talisman of apologetic informational *Übermensch* (Germ.) – the spam-queen from

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Katrina Neiburga's video. The screen and keyboard interface leads us to discrete object by Eriks Bozis *Press! Press! Press!*, that is laconically countering the affluent statement of *Spamatrex*. The first version of the work was created in 2003 as a model for a monument-object *Monument for the Urban Space* in the European city of culture 2003 Graz, where it was carried out as a composition of scattered keys in a city square. The small prototype was neatly arranged in the form of cross – "imperative mood of the title and words Delete, End, Insert, Pause/Break on the main keys of the cross provoke the short circuit in a viewer, when the Lutheran virtue of the work encounters manipulative identity of corporate aesthetics"². Throughout his career Eriks Bozis transforms the "normal" view on the reality by adding another customary, but slightly altered object of everyday. He tackles the stereotypes of the everyday vision and reveals structurally hidden humane meanings in blank usage value. The cut-out text, an advertising image, slightly re-designed functional object. He borrows from casual, common and functional things, and alters them into mocking memorials of blank efficiency and rationality. At the same time Eriks Bozis' ideas are universalistic – he uses artificial products of civilisation that can be re-treated and included as a personal subversive critique added in the space of the expansive western civilisation.

Remarkable is the difference how two of the established artists Gints Gabrans and Eriks Bozis treat and update the sacral symbolism in their recent pieces. If Bozis relies on the striking rationality and the clear definition of options: Cancel, Escape, Delete, then the idealism of Gints Gabrans' *Water Memory* refers to the mighty subculture of the rationalist project – mysticism. Coming from the same generation as Eriks Bozis, Gints Gabrans sets his practice on different rules – his working process involves diving into random, locally circulating information and drawing on the passions, curiosity and superstitions inherent both to the simple minds and the elite. He traces the archetypical origins of fear, beliefs, and (nowadays) mysticism that are distributed by contemporary media. In Gints' works the catch is in the cut into reality; he literally resamples everyday actions and structures them into the exhibition showcase. At the same time he is bothered how to make his works understandable for every human being and achieves it by preserving the multiple layers of interpretation. One could even call his works behaviourist as they appeal to the ideals – the search, for new

knowledge, for unexplored domains, for beautiful, or – more pragmatically – for happiness and fame. Besides, he possesses rare ability of total change in his subjects of interest. His latest artworks exploring the world of the illusions of light and the effects of perception appear like an antagonism of his previous work with media reality – one and a half year long staging of the reality show that invaded Latvian media displaying transformation of the city bum into a media star (the work that gained him the Hansabanka Art Award for the Baltic artist in 2004). In 2004/2005 the artist has turned his attention to the subtle structures of light waves that evoke visual illusions. His latest installations isolate the viewer in an unreal space of light-effects, mirroring and disappearing surfaces, and, finally, of reflections on the unstable rules of the visible world. He quotes a number of references as his sources and those cover a wide spectrum, starting from writings of physicists and psychologists to the spiritual notes of soothers and enigmatic prophets and voodoos that populate our seemingly rationalist society.

“Suspense” is leaving us to sense the art as a response to everyday, and to evaluate eclectics that is synthesising and confronting the powers of tradition, technology and the new rational social project plunging into internal psychotic ambivalence and relativism worth of another “X-files” series. The issues evoked are suspended between nature, progress, routine and freedom of imagination.

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1 - <http://www.etonnantelettonie.org/>

2 - Hanno Soans “Latviesu adaptacija”, review in *newspaper NRA: Forums*, 23.05.03