

FACE THE UNEXPECTED

Media art from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania

Inke Arns, Hartware MedienKunstVerein
Kurt Wettengl, Museum am Ostwall

›face the unexpected‹ is an exhibition organized jointly by the Hartware MedienKunstVerein and the Museum am Ostwall on occasion of the 38th International Cultural Days of the City of Dortmund / ›scene: estonia, latvia, lithuania,‹ and presents contemporary media art from these three Baltic states. The Museum am Ostwall and the PHOENIX Halle Dortmund are showing 29 installations, videos, and photo series by 23 artists, connected by more than just their common geographical origin.

The german exhibition's title ›mit allem rechnen‹ can be understood in both figurative and literal senses. ›To count on anything‹ means as much as ›to be ready for anything, since one doesn't know what will happen at a time in which anything is (or seems) possible.‹ This first meaning refers to personal stories and history, to individual experiences in the context of the collective past, which, in this case, is largely connected to state socialism. In short, this meaning of the title has to do with situating the self, with exploring its origins and identity, and, consequently, with asking what the future will bring. It asks questions like ›Where do we come from?‹ and ›Where are we going?‹ At the same time, the title of the exhibition (at least in german) also has a decidedly economic meaning. In this sense, to have to ›face the unexpected‹ refers to the extreme pressure for individuals and society to adapt, succeed, and survive under conditions of radical change from a planned state socialist economy as a part of the Soviet Union to a free market economy in the framework of the European Union, whose democracy is, in the best case, based on a ›social‹ free market, but all too often involves blatant neo-liberalism.

In short, both meanings of the title address a process of change that all three countries have been undergoing for the last 15 years. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were part of the Soviet Union until 1991. Since 2004, they have been the only former Soviet republics to be integrated into the European Union. All three countries are changing at breakneck speed. One could say that the pace of transition is at an inverse proportion to the structural conservatism and staying power of the (political) system in Western Europe. While the changes underway in Western Europe involve a long-termed structural ›transition‹, the changes in the Baltic states express another extreme, namely radical structural ›rupture‹. By the way, this difference can also be applied to the old West German states and the newly formed state of the former GDR. Both stand for different paths into a globalized economy.

When we researched for this exhibition in Riga, Tallinn, and Vilnius in October 2005, it soon became very clear that the fact of some >common< origin in the Baltic region does not supply enough of a reason for exhibiting pieces together. Quite on the contrary, the cultures and the histories of all three countries are very different from one another. The same holds true on the field of contemporary visual art and media art.

Yet still, we decided to put together an exhibition with artists from these three countries. What interested us most was the intensity and personal note of artworks that address current political, social, and economic changes and those that connect questions as to the here-and-now with a past that is already known and yet still unknown, looking ahead into a future that is just as predictable and unforeseeable at once. >face the unexpected< gathers artworks on identity and economy, asking how singularities deal with their interrelation in the age of rapid, globalized capitalism.

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

Several artworks in the exhibition examine how the complexity of transformation affects the field of language, and how these changes alter the pattern of social integration. In her installation >Nadezhda/Hope<, Laura Stasiulyte shows a Russian receptionist attempting to learn both Lithuanian and English during her night shift. While learning Lithuanian would provide a guarantee for her civil rights, English would provide her with the possibility of finding points of connection with the world market. Arūnas Gudaitis >Tree of wisdom< also reflects upon the role of English as the lingua franca of globalization. It shows two female students from Ukraine and Taiwan practicing a foreign language that makes their communication possible at all. Sitting beneath the Tree of wisdom, they transmit a tradition that does not originally belong to either of their cultural circles. Both are preparing for a future that the man who only speaks Russian in Gintaras Makarevičius' video >Language of the past< has missed.

WILD CAPITAL¹

A beggar's rise and fall to and from media fame is how one could compactly describe the project >Starix< by Gints Gabrāns, initiated in 2001. The Latvian artist makes use of the mechanisms of reality TV, thus exposing them mercilessly. At the same time, he points toward the hopelessness of social losers, those disenfranchised through the political and social upheaval of the last years. In a piece from a few years before, the Estonian artist Kai Kaljo drew upon the format of American sitcoms. In doing so, she presented herself as a

¹ >Wildes Kapital< [Wild Capital] was the name of an event organized by the Kunsthau Dresden in collaboration with Visual Seminar, Sofia, and relations in 2005.

>loser< in front of an anonymous audience in order to raise questions as to the (self-)image of Eastern Europeans after the opening of borders and markets. In her video >Pathétique,< Kai Kaljo observes a drunk man on the street without coming to his aid. Instead of helping him, she makes him into the protagonist of an artistic performance.

Artūras Raila shows a further group of losers under the new economic conditions in >Under the flag,< where he literally exposes the narrow-mindedness of the nationalist discourse that has broken out as a result of the search for a national identity. Nomedas and Gediminas Urbonas have been examining Lithuania's post-socialist society since they began to collaborate in the mid-1990s, focusing on the results of excessive privatization. The consequences of such >denationalization< can, for example, be found in the sale of buildings that were formerly public (such as the movie theaters >Vilnius< and >Lietuva< in the center of Vilnius) as well as the construction of shopping-malls on the cities' outskirts. In >My address is neither a house nor a street, my address is a shopping center,< the Lithuanian video artist Eglė Rakauskaitė ironically and subversively questions the new economy's effects on consumer mentalities. The audio track of this four-channel video installation quotes an old how-to book for homemakers, whose advice seems especially antiquated in the light of domesticity today, though it also points toward how many values really have been consigned to the past. One can also understand the social project >T-Shroom< in this sense, which the artist group >The Primitives< (Katrīna Neiburga and Pēteris Ķīmelis) carried out in Riga in 2000. In the course of this project, they did research on the >survival< of the >t-shroom< (kombucha), a natural product which, steeped in sweet tea, had provided the basis for a refreshing homemade, unmarketable drink in the Baltic region for over a century, and is now being supplanted by new brand products, insofar as the consumer can afford Western soft drinks. The example of the >t-shroom< illustrates how the drink's private production is connected to traditions, stories, myths, and hopes toward a healthier life, all of which can be lost just as easily as the social networks of the past. By opening a temporary shop in which they passed on the bacterial fungus upon which this drink is based for free, Neiburga and Ķīmelis wanted to show that there are also other possible forms of exchange and socialization beyond the market economy.

GRAY MARKETS AND PARALLEL ECONOMIES

Katrīna Neiburga and Pēteris Ķīmelis continued their project in Great Britain in 2002. Among other things, they advertised this homemade drink through

classified ads. Of course, the point was not to place this product onto the British market. Instead, the goal was to test the idea of the parallel economy that played a central role as a form of self-supply under the planned economy of socialism and now continues to exist under new economic-political conditions in Western Europe.

Mirjam Wirz and Eglė Rakauskaitė also address economic questions, using the media of photography and video. The artist Mirjam Wirz, who is originally from Switzerland but has moved to Lithuania, focused her attention on the theme of the black market through a long-term photo project. Eglė Rakauskaitė, on the other hand, filmed non-spectacular documents of the buildup, daily life, and dismantling of Gariūnai, Eastern Europe's largest open air market. Gariūnai's black market economy has an existential importance to both sellers and buyers, though it also has a bad reputation.

In the framework of the structural change from planned socialism to a (neo)liberal economy, property relations have changed in two ways: first, the private property that was nationalized has been restituted, and second, formerly state-owned real estate is being privatized. The French-Estonian artist Eléonore de Montesquiou researched these changes in 2001 by examining eight privatized/restituted houses in Tallinn and interviewing their present owners, whose personal narratives always also return to the political history and the present economic situation of the country. In her series ›Daily life (Buitis)‹, the young photographer Joana Deltuvaitė takes another approach, creating a typology of everyday objects and their memories in small, cheap apartments, which she briefly rented to undertake her visual search for traces. Here, it is neither people nor walls, as in Arturas Valiauga's work, who are ›narrating‹ their history, but the things themselves.

GENERATION X

The theme of generation and the (disrupted) connections between them also plays an important role. By today, the Soviet past only has a meaning for those who are over 25 years old, while younger people do not really know it at all. Both Mark Raidpere's ›Father‹ and ›Voiceover‹ and Jaan Toomik's ›Dancing with dad‹ are very personal attempts to approach the fathers that they lost touch with at an early age, be it through death or through increasing estrangement. Tiia Johansson's ›Namebook‹ is a quiet meditation on the living and the dead, recorded shortly after the passenger ferry ›Estonia‹ sank in September 1994.

CIRCULATIONS

The opening or displacement of political, geographical, and economic borders after 1990 has also affected how goods and people move through space. In ›Leave the keys outside when you leave,‹ Killu Sukmit and Mari Laanemets observe people on their journeys through the old and new border zones. Elina Lihačeva pursues the altered function and significance of urban areas after the geopolitical changes in the early 1990s through a special archeology of the town of Karosta. As a naval base, Karosta was a closed city until the collapse of the Soviet Union, inhabited exclusively by Russians. After Latvia gained its independence in 1991, the small town has a good chance of becoming a European example for cultural integration, thanks to the engagement of cultural agents.

(PERSONAL) HISTORY

In ›M‹, Ģirts Korps works with memories of his home town. For him, this form of anamnesis is connected to the larger problem of the function of myth as a model for explaining the world's past and present. The search for a means of finding a place for the self and its identity in times of often dramatic biographical and social upheaval becomes palpable in the rapid camera movement of Raivo Kelomees' video performance ›SelfSearch.‹

The exhibition ›face the unexpected‹ shows work of (media) art that are interested in asking how people deal with extremely speeded-up political, social, and economic change on their own terms. These works show a situation that – in the light of globalization – is not that different from the situation in the ›West.‹ Perhaps recent developments in Eastern Europe allow us to see certain things with greater clarity, because they are taking place in a compressed form and in a situation of extreme acceleration, as if in fast forward.

In the framework of ›face the unexpected,‹ the exhibition in the Museum am Ostwall is paralleled by an international workshop and a series of public talk organized by the Hartware MedienKunstVerein in collaboration with the Riga-based RIXC media laboratory. Additionally, the PHOENIX Halle is also showing a new live installation by radioqualia and RIXC that present real time audio-output from the VIRAC radio telescope in Irbene, Latvia. The concert series ›Electronic Baltikum‹, organized by Martin Juhls on three evenings in the Künstlerhaus, the Museum am Ostwall and the PHOENIX Halle, is presenting electronic music from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

At this point, we would like to express our thanks to the many people who helped to realize this exhibition. First of all, we would like to express our gratitude to all the artists who have accepted our invitation to participate and have kindly

loaned us their pieces. The research for this exhibition was extensive and would have been impossible without the support that we received in Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius in October 2005. For this, we would like to thank Solvita Krese, the director of the Latvian Center for Contemporary Arts and her colleagues Iveta Boiko and Ieva Astahovska in Riga, Sirje Helme, the director of the Center for Contemporary Arts in Tallinn, her successor Johannes Saar as well as Eilve Manglus and Elin Kard in Tallinn, and Lolita Jablonskienė, director of the Contemporary Art Information Center in Vilnius, and her two colleagues Ruta Pileckaite und Agnė Narušytė. They compiled extensive information for our benefit and organized meetings with artists, which proved very intense.

We would also like to express our thanks to the Cultural Ministries of the republics Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. In important preliminary meetings, Reet Weidebaum, cultural attaché of the Embassy of the Republic of Estonia, Solvita Martinšone, cultural attaché of the Embassy of the Republic of Latvia, and Rasa Balcykonyte, cultural attaché of the Embassy of the Republic of Lithuania kindly agreed to finance the transport of the artworks and travel expenses of the participating artists. The realization of this project would have been impossible without the financial support of Kunststiftung NRW. We are much obliged to its committees, and especially its (former, since February 2006) president Ilse Brusis, and its general secretary Regina Wyrwoll for their crucial financial commitment. Our expressed thanks also goes out to someone else from Düsseldorf, namely to Gerhard Horn of the cultural section of the State Chancellery of North-Rhine Westphalia, who was very helpful to us in presenting this exhibition to the public. We would also like to thank Kurt Eichler, managing director of the Dortmund Kulturbetriebe for making additional financing available that was vital for realizing our concept in full. Many thanks also go to Burkhard Rinsche, the coordinator of all cultural activities of the International Cultural Days in Dortmund for his many intercessions and his backing of our project.

For the catalogue, we were able to win Lolita Jablonskienė in Vilnius, Mara Traumane in Riga and Anders Härm in Tallinn, who have been exceedingly familiar with the development in the art of their respective countries. The translations of the texts were made by Bernadette Ott, Regine Rapp and David Riff. We can be grateful that the essays, short texts, and illustration have been turned into an attractive book by labor b in Dortmund. Our heartfelt thanks also goes to Dr. Nicole Grothe, the art historical intern of the Museum am Ostwall, who accompanied the exhibition and the catalogue on both art historical and organizational fronts, as well as Susanne Ackers, the managing director of the Hartware MedienKunstVerein, who kept a close eye on our planning in terms of both fi-

nancing and time. Francis Hunger is responsible for the conception and execution of the ›RFID‹ workshop, a collaboration between the RIXC in Riga and the Hartware MedienKunstVerein in Dortmund, as well as for organizing the ›Solar Radio Station‹ by radioqualia (NZ/AUS/NL/GB) and RIXC, Riga. Last but not least, we would like to thank Uwe Gorski for doing an excellent job, as always: he is responsible for the design and media equipment in this exhibition.