

Anna Viola Hallberg is a visual artist and curator from Sweden with a strong engagement for the social issues such as gender, class and sexuality. In a number of projects she collaborates¹ with Annica Karlsson Rixon, Phd candidate in Artistic Research at School of Photography, University of Gothenburg. Hallberg graduated 2003 from the Curatorial Program, Stockholm University, Sweden. Hallberg has a B.A in Cinema Studies from Stockholm University and is a graduate of Stockholm Film School with a MA in International Museum Studies, University of Gothenburg, 2008.

Palpable Curatorial Work Recollection of Spaces

Thinking of the artist as a curator and queer exhibition practice is, something that can be done in relation to *State of Mind*; a photography-, video- and sound- based art installation where the artists as curators, becomes the mediator between source-community, the institution and the general audience. The work is activated with a think tank and a three-day video shoot, performed by the artists together with the local communities in addition to artist talks and portfolio reviews. *State of Mind* was made between 2005-2008 and for the last two years it has been exhibited in Post Soviet states and Sweden as an independent production.

This presentation delivers an insight to some of the key-features that have formed and informed the development of various aspects of the work with *State of Mind*. It is a reflective rather than analytic view, pointing out conditions and criteria's relevant for the development. The presentation balances between the making of the artwork and exhibiting it a quiet interlaced process.

State of Mind is an exhibition format working with art as a vehicle towards activating social change. It introduces a discussion on intercultural perspectives and identity politics. Leadership, democracy and human rights are central matters as the installation explores the boundaries between ethics, legislation, prejudice and civic expectations in the LGBTQ life of St Petersburg, Russia, focusing on lesbians and bisexual women. It brings up subjects such as shortcomings vs. possibilities, belonging vs. alienation, appointed- vs. selected identity. *State of Mind* embodies experiences and provides a surface for interpretation. The groups in focus are activists, academics and artists with an extended invitation to a broader audience. Translating between cultures and languages, especially dealing with non-mainstream cultures one approaches the well know risk of "exporting" not only good intentions but also a new set of problems. Another parameter for the general framework is the

¹ www.aview.se, www.aviewnomadgallery.com

position of contemporary art in Post Soviet states, it can in some ways be said to be almost as fringed as LGBTQ issues. It has been a strategy of ours to actively work for exchange(s) between three spheres both as the artwork was made and as it was installed. Queer Curations within non-private institutions could perhaps be perceived as something from minority to minority at the same time as from minority to majority by opening up a dialogue or to spark an understanding of shared space, places of interaction.

The foundation of the work on site was made in a time when the Russian journalist and activist Anna Politkovskaya² was killed. Xenophobia and orthodox extremists claimed their presence in the streets, and through this in a way also in media. It was a drawback in the efforts towards an open society. NGOs were limited in their ways of acting and international funding largely came to a halt due to governmental decisions. The space for activists and journalists to express their opinions diminished. Leadership was in general a hot topic, not only on high levels but also among the grassroots movement trying to form. It was looked upon as something that should more or less organically reveal itself. At the same time, St Petersburg is a place much more refined and tolerant than other parts of the country, it is in a way San Francisco of Russia. A city of liberty, or at least more liberty than many other places, however without any real claims or unified activist group bringing up issues such as tolerance or legal rights.

The LGBTQs in Russia is a group living without legal or social rights, many fear to be open about their orientation as they get close to everyday settings such as family or the workplace. To accommodate this in the artwork a contract was drawn in great trust between the artist and the people portrayed in the project. For each new exhibition everyone of the somewhat 40 participants are contacted to re-negotiate the terms of exposure, this to ensure that they at the moment agree to present their face in the specific context. It is a complex process. However, it creates a window to include a number of interesting life stories, that otherwise might have been left out. In a scenario where someone feels uncomfortable, the photograph is removed without any comment in the exhibition space, or replaced with an image of the Palace Bridge if it is in the video installation. An example of this is constituted by one of the most “out”

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anna_Politkovskaya

persons fell in love with a political advisor and had to step back into the closet, such can life be and of course it might change again.

The last session of a Scandinavian-Russian art residency³ made the research for *State of Mind* possible. The interviews in *State of Mind* deliver some nuances of life in St Petersburg, it also brings to accentuates the conflict between people thinking about LGBTQ education of the general public and how it should be done. Strong voices in Moscow want Pride Parades while others stress that society is not ready for such activities yet. There is, and should perhaps not be, a unison model for the activist work. But the people taking the consequences of the actions should be able to feel confident about the strategic plans and aims. To continue to expand on the corner stones, St Petersburg has a history of provocations, for instance someone from the outside announcing that a parade is to happen, while the local LGBTQ groups knows nothing about it. It gets written up in media and the xenophobia escalates without anyone being there to respond in the press from the community. Looking at a more personal level, some people express that their life is in many ways more spontaneous and by this open for interventions and affairs in comparison for instance to Sweden. What can or should an exhibition contribute with in such a climate?

State of Mind is based on a selection method of snowballing, where we as artists only asked for a broad span of people as it comes to age, occupation, and that LGBTQ issues of daily life should be addressed from the perspective of women. The visual language of the installation is intimate yet engaging, delivering a sense of being on location. It is a merge between “here” and “there” (“us” and “them”). The format requires an active participation where the visitor steps aside from the spectator position and engages in the stories and by this also becoming physically present to others as silhouettes towards the bright view of Neva, the concept of portraiture is introduced by group photographs leading the way into the video installation. One is drawn in by a lingering poetic documentary sound of the city and river with whispering voices, leaking from the headphones. The local communities and/or the general visitor can read the 7 monitors, with “talking heads”, as an ever-changing group portrait against a backdrop of the river. It is far from the iconic city emblem, the Palace Bridge during the celebrated white nights. Instead it presents a side of the

³ Last one of a residency series by NIFCA (Nordic Institute For Contemporary Art) and Pro Arte, St Petersburg.

city not so often seen, an industrial landscape with some housing complexes and chimneys beyond the central position of the swirling water.

The more than 3 hours of stories, embodies a challenge; should the visitor listen to closely to a few people or hear bits and peaces from a larger group? On what grounds are the selections made, why approaching a specific individual? The photographs are delivering empowering group portraits in the urban landscape. It is portraits of LGBT groups and the city. The videos in the black box talks from the sublime, about the personal, not to say private, sphere. Re-visiting the photographic works, after spending time in the black box, they are then informed by the specific stories and the urban landscapes come to life. The photographs are mounted on midnight-blue walls, a recollection of the white nights with its deep blue sky. It also sends off associations to the tarps at construction sites, this is also where the scaffolding pipes used for holding the video monitors fit in. If they are not put into the context of the verticals used by pole-dancers. Together they call up on a reference to the expanding city driven by the new economy.

An early long-term goal, for us as artists, was to encourage amalgamation of agents who operate separately, and to contribute to the forming of a coalition between individuals and organizations. We wanted to provide a palpable art installation, bringing up these issues and by that participate in the development by encouraging people to take a second look of the politics of everyday and how life is lived. If one has the same obligations, should there not at least be a path towards similar treatment including that of fellow citizens and legal rights or at least not to fear the use of existing laws?

The slow process of a large format analogue shoot or the making of video interviews halts the rhythm of everyday life for a moment. Being visible on site, shaping the representation of an LGBTQ consciousness, in the very center of the commercial and historical part of their city. The activity itself is not illegal but rare in sense of looking at it as constructing legacy and generating a collective official memory of people and places. The claiming of public space is at stake.

Working with the exhibition in each city as guests not only in the institution but also in the city a sense of momentum is created, a kick-start and a sense of “here” and “now”. An opportunity for the silence to be broken and representation claimed. The work is carried out from a dual position of us being insiders and outsiders discussing the specific issues. A long process of building relationships with the communities via email, social media, and research trips has contributed to a sense of readiness, the local communities coming together. The research trips were not made in a concentrated session, but here and there as new funding was allocated. Individuals, institutions and organizations were approached in order to establish trust and to obtain a nuanced view of the everyday life. A similar strategy was carried out in the concept development phase; where a number of area specialists were consulted prior to implementation into the set of assets we used to make the artwork from.

The visual language balances on the line of a poetic documentary, and epic tail of life in the city. The aesthetics could be said to hint towards the type of portraits found in the collections at Catherine the Great at the Hermitage or perhaps even the Socialist Realism of The Soviet Era, types of references familiar to a broad audience in the city. But more so there is a strong connotation of commonality, a reference to the type of portraits found in the family album. It does not require pre assessed knowledge of contemporary art or photography however looking at the installation but with a theoretical framework several issues are highlighted by the work, such as that of objectivity of something documentary. As an installation the work discusses spatial experiences, place and identity are brought forward via oral history. The interpretations of these experiences in our artwork are not neutral or objective. The work is an archive of consequences of a specific time in space and in this sense the role as the earlier claimed mediator can be questioned. The body of the work is a consolidation of experiences for a select group in a certain moment at a specific time.

State of Mind aims at attracting a broad audience, the same set of questions put forward in the video installation is indirectly set to the visitor. Terminology and concepts such as the “LGBTQ” did not at the time translate well to Russian. The focus of the narrative is located in the every day life and to provide a future view of the city. Most people did not think there would be any change at all or that it would be

worse, time has proven them wrong to present date. LGBTQ-networks⁴ have emerged in both St Petersburg and Russia working towards recognition for the group in civic society.

We carried out the fundraising for both the tour and production costs. The project has received funding for touring from Swedish Arts Grants Committee and The Swedish Institute. The photographic series was paid for via a purchase of an early edition of one of the works from a collector. Stockholm Pride the host for EuroPride⁵ stepped up to the plate for the video installation. Their social fund not only provided the technical needs, but also two tickets for participants to fly in to pride and the opening of *State of Mind* in August 2008. The Swedish General Consulate in St Petersburg⁶ started the trend by donating two airfares. It provided us with an opportunity to get feedback from parts of the source community and a chance to work on creating the first session of the activating format Lezzie Think Tank together. For the visitors it also constituted a week of gaining inspiration and to make contacts with organizations and individuals, as well as bring a starting point for processing the experience into local aims and strategies and to rethink the space for of St Petersburg. *State of Mind* remained open for one month and was also part of Stockholm Culture Days.

In September the same year, the Swedish General Consulate inaugurated the exhibition in St Petersburg. They were relieved there were no demonstrations or any attacks against the exhibition. The mere fact of having this pointed out as a not unlikely scenario, sets the framework for the society in which *State of Mind* was introduced. As a precaution the work was presented with another installation *Resonance*⁷ to defuse the attention of the topic and rather put the emphasis on the importance of networks. The exhibiting institution, ROSPHOTO – the national center of photography in Russia, noticed a 60 per cent increase of visitors. It is now, two years later a vivid benchmark in how life was in St Petersburg and the expectations of the future. It is via the installation possible to point out several changes. The project is once again invited to St Petersburg this time to the second International Festival of Queer Culture 2010. Exhibiting at galleries in Kharkiv (Ukraine) and St Petersburg (Russia) was in one sense the biggest achievements, since they both are state run

⁴ Out St Petersburg , <http://piter.lgbtnet.ru>

⁵ Stockholmpride.org. (The theme for Europride 2008 was “Swedish Sin – Breaking borders”=

⁶ Already in 2006 the consulate hosted a reception with all key players of the city’s potential LGBTQ scene present.

⁷ Installation by Karlsson Rixon and Hallberg, 2006- Artist website: www.aview.se

institutions⁸. In these former totalitarian regimes it seemed almost impossible for people to understand how we made it into those institutions with an exhibition on queers. Many of the visitors asked us how we could get permission to exhibit there. They got truly chocked over our response; “We were invited”.

The path behind the invitation was a trust building process, but also how could they say no to have this type of high standard of work arriving to them, in both cases we were the first international exhibition bringing the actual prints and other artworks. The path in and out of institutions has at times slightly altered the visualization but never interfered with the integrity of the narrative. Slowly handing over the exhibition to the local curators and allowing the communities to take ownership has been a format explored in order to maintain a strong connection between the local source community, the gallery, activists, academics, stakeholders and general audience.

The enhancement of LGBTQ politics has been done in the two supporting formats. *Lezzie Think Tank*, a discussion and problem solving forum constructed as a relay of questions handed over from one city to another city travels with the exhibition as well as *Leaving Your Traces* where we as artists produce a local version of the video interviews at each new location. On top of this we have also done the more traditional artist talks and portfolio reviews. Both Kharkiv (Ukraine) and St Petersburg are cities know for its photographers. The photographs we showed provided something that they normally don't have access to from the point of view of content as well as technically. For the LGBTQ communities they became prominent in the capacity of being very large framed images of people “like themselves” in public space.

Something often left out of discussions about art, at least in the Swedish context, is the viral effect of exhibitions and the artwork. With this thinking a larger group is reached, those who never made it to see it them selves but heard about it through friends or colleagues and by this becoming a secondary user group. Part of the message reaches them this way or perhaps via media. A text or a TV-spot becomes an opportunity to talk about issues normally not discussed and by this bringing on a viral effect of the exhibition. The art scene can sometimes provide a forum to bringing up political matters that the society at large can't handle in the political discussions. The

⁸ ROSPHOTO, Center of photography for the Russian Federation and Kharkiv Municipal Gallery

exhibition time becomes a step-stone, a point to keep the dialogue going around also after the exhibition is closed. In a good scenario new coalitions have been made and the networks continue to grow. The other effect is what Richard Florida refers to as the gentrification factors via The Creative Force. This including both the LGBTQ and art scene as engines in development of society, this is if one wants the kind of society this model strives for.

As for the overall narrative *State of Mind*⁹ was developed as part of a trilogy together with *Resonance* and *Code of Silence*. The works look at social conventions, family, love and career and deal with power relations exemplified by issues of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and class. They unravel groups embedded in silences. They can be seen as micro history where memory, translation, visual representation and oral history are central matters. In each of the three works a different group is approached that relates to us as artists, and our personal spheres. They are not made to provoke but to open up for dialogues and revisits of identity politics and to access silences of shared space.

State of Mind is made not only to be exhibited in the post Soviet States but also to have relevance in our own back yard (Europe and North America)¹⁰, aiming at a queer exhibition format discussing everyday conditions of select groups rather than just exhibiting queers.

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⁹ The work consists of; *State of Mind – Prologue* (5 min film), *State of Mind* (installation) and an epilogue (work in progress, film) Supporting formats; *Lezzie Think Tank* and *Leaving Your Traces*. Artist website: www.aview.se.

¹⁰ 2008 Stockholm (SE), St Petersburg (RU), Gothenburg (SE)/2009 Kharkiv (UA) and Kiev (UA)/ 2010 Minsk (BY) and Warsaw (PL), Stockholm (SE)

THE TASK OF THE CURATOR

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Presenter: Annica Karlsson Rixon

Text: Anna Viola Hallberg

Panel: Karlsson Rixon & Hallberg (Queer Curations, May 15th)

Karlsson Rixon is a Phd candidate in Artistic Research*, University of Gothenburg and a MFA from Cal Arts 1994. Hallberg has a MS/Msc in International Museum Studies, University of Gothenburg 2008 and a BA in cinema and curatorial studies, University of Stockholm 2003.

Karlsson Rixon is a Phd candidate in Artistic Research, University of Gothenburg and a MFA from Cal Arts 1994. Hallberg has a MS/Msc in International Museum Studies, University of Gothenburg 2008 and a BA in cinema and curatorial studies, University of Stockholm 2003.

Topic: Artist as Curator or Feminist/Queer Curating or Collaboration and/or Curatorial Collectives

Abstract

Palpable Curatorial Work: Recollection of Spaces

– a case study of *State of Mind* where artists as curators becomes the mediator between source community, the institution and the general audience.

In *Palpable Curatorial Work: Recollection of Spaces* the focus is put on places of interaction, both as the art work was made on location and also in the exhibition space. It links representation and the concept of shared space on the boundaries between ethics, legislation, prejudice and civic expectations in the LGBTQ life of St Petersburg, Russia, focusing on lesbians and bisexual women. It discusses subjects such as shortcomings vs. possibilities, belonging vs. alienation, appointed- vs. selected identity. Leadership, democracy and human rights are central matters. In each city where *State of Mind* arrives this is looked upon through local conditions. As for the overall narrative *State of Mind* was developed as a segment of a trilogy where the other two artworks are *Resonance* and *Code of Silence*. The works look at social conventions, family, love and career and deal with power relations exemplified by issues of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and class. Memory, narration, visual representation and oral history are central matters. In each of the three works a different group is approached that relates to the artists' personal sphere, they are told with insider's perspectives. *State of Mind* is made not only to be exhibited in the post Soviet States but also to have relevance in our own back yard (Europe and North America), aiming at a queer exhibition format discussing everyday conditions of select groups locally as the installation travels.

**State of Mind* is part of Annica Karlsson Rixon's dissertation project; CHASING IDENTITY: reflections on visual representation, construction of identity and writing of history through three lens-based art projects.

Abstract Proposal:

Palpable curatorial work: in and out of institutions.

- a case study where artists as curators becomes the mediator between source community, the institution and the general audience.

The art installation *State of Mind* navigates on the boundaries of several institutions in countries like Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Sweden. The exhibition format works with art as a vehicle towards activating social change. The media of the artwork is photography, video and sound, but with interventions in public space, workshops and think tanks. Linking the three spheres art, academia and activism.

The Swedish artists/curators Annica Karlsson Rixon and Anna Viola Hallberg are touring *State of Mind* and the activating sessions for two years. To ensure that the capacity plays out to its highest potentials they have been on research/contact trips to the cities where the exhibition later will be held to ensure the highest level of preparedness.

State of Mind introduces a discussion of intercultural perspectives to identity politics. Stories are selected from documentary material collected in great trust between the artists and the interviewees in fieldwork. Leadership, democracy and human rights are central matters. *State of Mind* explores boundaries between ethics, legislation, prejudice and civic expectations in the LGBTQ life of St Petersburg, Russia, focusing on lesbians and bisexual women. It discusses subjects such as shortcomings vs. possibilities, belonging vs. alienation, appointed- vs. selected identity. In each city where *State of Mind* arrives this is looked upon through local conditions.

As for the overall narrative *State of Mind* was developed as a segment of a trilogy where the other two artworks are *Resonance* and *Code of Silence*. The topics of how and why groups construct networks and communities are in focus. The works look at social conventions, family, love and career and deal with power relations exemplified by issues of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and class. Memory, narration, visual representation and oral history are central matters. In each of the three works a different group is approached that relates to the artists' personal sphere, they are told with insider's perspectives.

Karlsson Rixon and Hallberg are working on freelance basis. They are not representing any specific institution and moves fluidly in exhibition systems. This possibly opens up for a more dynamic approach. The format developed during the work with the trilogy will be carried on to an exhibition at Gothenburg Art Museum 2011, bridging art and science in relation to the ocean.

Text by: Anna Viola Hallberg (April 2010)

Artistic Research Project/Art installation; *State of Mind* by Annica Karlsson Rixon/Anna Viola Hallberg

Curriculum Vitae/Bio:

The Swedish artists currently reside in Oakland, California. Karlsson Rixon is a visiting scholar at UC Berkeley, department of Rhetoric. They are based on Brännö and in Stockholm, Sweden.

Websites: www.aview.se, www.aviewnomadgallery.com

Annica Karlsson Rixon's and Anna Viola Hallberg's collaboration is based on documentary explorations with interviews and portraits as the point of departure. They explore aspects of conditions such as belonging and networks and the group and group identity are central matters. The works are often presented in spatial installations considering the junction of photography and moving images, and interlocked with seminars and workshops. Karlsson Rixon has 20 years experience of exhibiting photographic work. Hallberg's art practice since the early 90-s revolves around performance and avant-garde film. They are based in Sweden, but are currently residing in Oakland, California. They work individually and as a collaborate team in lens-based installations as well as curatorial work. The collaboration has been going on since 2004.

Annica Karlsson Rixon is a visiting scholar at the Rhetoric Department at University of California, Berkeley. She is a PhD student in Artistic Research at the School of Photography, at the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Gothenburg. Karlsson Rixon held a professor position at the School of Photography, University of Gothenburg, 2003-07. She received a Master of Fine Art in 1997 from California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California. Her undergraduate studies were accomplished at the Nordic School of Photography in Stockholm, Sweden 1988. She has exhibited extensively since the early 1990's.

Anna Viola Hallberg graduated 2003 from the Curatorial Program, Stockholm University, Sweden. Hallberg has a B.A in Cinema Studies from Stockholm University and is a graduate of Stockholm Film School with a MA in International Museum Studies, University of Gothenburg, 2008. Writing her thesis on contemporary art in museum exhibitions outside the paradigm of the art institution. Since 2005 her work is often in the collaborate format and has been shown in Ukraine, Russia, Latvia, Germany, Spain, Serbia, Turkey, US, Canada and Sweden

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