

emils rode

republicart-interview on *rīgas modes* and *psychogeographic riga this week (re:public)*
riga | 08 09 2003

raimund minichbauer: in the framework of *re:public* you and your partner simona veilande show under the label *pureculture* a further part of the project *rīgas modes*, on-going since spring 2002. how did the project evolve and what were the developments before *re:public*?¹

emils rode: *rīgas modes* started with an interest in the street style of the senior citizens of riga. our first step was to take a series of street style photography of pensioners, and from this we developed some thoughts about how to present this layer of cultural meaning. we organised a small photo-exhibition, which was shown first in berlin, and then in riga. then we further developed the concept and we started a series of studio photography: we invited certain senior citizens who some friends recommended us, and went to a professional photographer's studio to realise sort of simulated fashion photography shoots. we are showing this material in exhibitions and we are producing a fashion catalogue², which is published in october 2003. we don't want to stop here, but present this idea in various modes. now in *re:public* we also start to organise some live events, e.g. a pensioner fashion show.

one basic idea is the observation, that this is a vernacular style of riga, which is probably the most interesting one that you can observe. it is an unnoticed layer of culture, but it is one with a meaning, which is created by time and a kind of patina of old things. the older citizens of riga don't renew their wardrobes a lot, so they wear clothes which are tens of years old. this is really what is interesting, that they wear these clothes today and how they look in today's context. in a kind of postmodern perspective, it is interesting how this style can be picked up and presented in a contemporary way. we try to take it out from the usual context and make it interesting - it *is* interesting, but the question is, if there is attention directed to it, which normally is not.

raimund minichbauer: are the people you invited to the photo shootings in a way connected to the fields of art or fashion?

emils rode: no, but there is some bias in this group, that some of them are experienced with e.g. being models in the art academy - models for painting -, so they are maybe more open and more extroverted persons, and it is maybe easier to persuade them to participate. but otherwise, they are just any senior citizens of riga. they are in some respect quite typical, but on the other hand - with the age all clothes of a person carry an imprint of that personality. so it is also a personal message of each of these people. you can in a way read the story of these people by their clothes. that's another meaning of the project: that they are not like a usual model - very anonymous, just young and beautiful and tall and so on -, but these older people, who wear their own clothes, also tell a story about themselves.

raimund minichbauer: i had the impression that fashion design is an important issue here in riga. it is very visible on the streets, fashion design is part of the stylish appearance of the city centre, and for example, on my flight to riga with airbaltic, the traveller's magazine on the airplane was some kind of fashion journal. how did this situation come about, what is the history of fashion design, in which way was it part of the so-called 'transition' to capitalism?

emils rode: one thing that is noticeable in latvia's 'transition' to capitalism is that we don't have our own fashion brands. all fashion is brought from somewhere else, southern european chains or any other kind of fashion, but nothing is to deal with our own ideas about fashion. this was not so until the 1980ies. we had - for better or worse - our own fashion culture. for example '*rīgas modes*' - like the title of our project - was a chain of ateliers which made clothes from a selection of models, that was developed regularly. people could walk in an atelier and have their clothes tailored according to these fabrication models. '*rīgas modes*' was one of them, and of course there were mass-producers of clothes, which were also in some way rooted in the local context. but this

¹ see also: *rīgas modes* project timeline: http://republicart.net/art/concept/rigasmodes_timeline.pdf

² http://www.kpp.lv/en/projects/projects_2.php

was lost with the collapse of the soviet enterprises. for some time we have been left without our own fashion. so, if we want to make a statement about ourselves, how it is expressed through fashion, we have to look back at the clothes that older people wear, because it seems that with time these clothes really start to express something about the reality of this place, of riga's conditions.

raimund minichbauer: the project also turns the attention to the general situation of the older people here in riga. how would you describe this situation?

emils rode: most of them are quite poor. i would say it is also a consequence of this new capitalism, that all of a sudden the majority of people who are on pension find themselves in a situation in which they have only one hundred euro a month, for example, and they can't afford anything. this creates their marginalisation in the new society, although there is quite a lot of older people - one third of the overall population is above the pension age, which is basically about sixty. it is a big group, but it is socially totally underrepresented. i would say, it is even stereotyped, that let's say a mainstream yuppie would think that a pensioner is a certain type of person who has a certain lifestyle, but which is unimportant. and this project attempts to draw the attention of people who are our age - in their twenties or thirties - to notice the older group as an equally important one, and one that carries meaning that can be important for them as well, although these older people have little role in contemporary society.

raimund minichbauer: *rīgas modes* has been presented in diverse contexts, for example in a hotel in the course of a bigger project...

emils rode: this was the latvia trade mark project³. within this project we displayed some mannequins in the window of a hotel on one of riga's main boulevards. we dressed up the mannequins in actual older people's clothes and created a shop window situation. on first sight it looked like in a shop window of a fashion shop, but on closer look you can see that the clothes are old and - if you know where they come from, then of course you know that your grandma also has clothes like this. so it was a game with perception. being put in the shop window draws attention to them as maybe some objects of desire, but when you pay closer attention, you see that it is old and useless things basically, which though have their own aesthetic value. this was an interesting exercise, but then a scandal happened: the owners of the hotel at one point had a problem with one of the works - not this work actually, but the work of another artist - and then the exhibit was removed from all this location's shop windows.

raimund minichbauer: for the presentation within *re:public* you chose a very different location in the maskačka (moskauer vorstadt)...

emils rode: this is exactly what we are trying to do, not to repeat ourselves, every time to show the project from a slightly different angle, but along the same theme, so to reinterpret this original thinking through various media.

raimund minichbauer: maskačka district seems to be one of the most abandoned districts in riga, why did you choose this place?

emils rode: the idea was again to play with a contradiction between the location and the content. we wanted to recreate a kind of fashion show atmosphere in a totally inappropriate place, let's say the last place where you would like to put your fashion boutique. the shop where we put our installation was as it was, we didn't improve much, so it was pretty dilapidated, not so clean and so on. we left all these surrounds intact and put in our catwalk-installation. the meaning of this was to create a situation where local people and visitors would maybe for a second reflect on themselves as objects of fashion, actually, that every fashion is fashion, even if you don't think that your clothing is fashion, you are still a kind of fashion statement or object.

raimund minichbauer: on the opening day, when i entered the room, there was the catwalk with

³ <http://www.artgarden.lv/english/news.htm>

the headlights, some chairs around the catwalk, and a table with drinks. there was a second room, which was apparently 'backstage,' where the catwalk started, and which was only accessible via the catwalk. a few people were already sitting on the chairs around that catwalk, waiting for something to happen. but there was not going to happen any show or something similar.

emils rode: yes, a lot of people who were coming into our shop on this opening day, were asking 'so, what will happen?' i think, this is an interesting reaction, and one that we intended. by putting this catwalk and the lights we created a situation of expectation, that something should happen. but that was exactly the idea, to make people suspect that we are waiting for them to walk the catwalk and to sit down and observe the catwalk, so they were the subject of this performance.

raimund minichbauer: but you are going to organise some events, too?

emils rode: yes, we plan to do a bigger event this weekend. we will invite a photographer to do a kind of fashion shoot, and we will have a catwalk show of some of our models⁴, and a dj; so more an entertaining event.

raimund minichbauer: what are the next steps in the *riġas modes* project?

emils rode: we will present it in vilnius in november as part of a co-exhibition of latvian and lithuanian young artists. it will be also the next step in this thinking about how we want to represent our project, from street style to studio photography, now it will be a synthesis of both: we asked our models to pose in an urban environment, and we did this kind of fashion shoots you can find in magazines like *vogue*, but with this actual models in their own clothes.

raimund minichbauer: what is the meaning of the name of your group, *pureculture*?

emils rode: we all live in a set of assumptions, and this *pureculture* tries to look into these assumptions and what makes up a culture of everyday life or kind of our imaginary.

raimund minichbauer: together with your partner simona veilande and *re:public*-curator solvita krese you edited the *re:public* program-booklet, which was published in the form of a city guide⁵, that in addition to brief project descriptions includes texts on psychogeographic walks and travels through riga. how was the idea for this booklet developed?

emils rode: at the beginning was the general idea to produce a guide, and we decided to include more or less whole riga and to give a brief insight into interesting places and unusual itineraries. and then came the idea of psychogeography, this *dérive* concept that you walk through various ambiances of the city and observe what is happening. many of us have been doing this for some time, and this is where a lot of ideas come from, especially from drifting through these proletarian neighbourhoods and marginal parts of riga. and we also decided to appropriate a medium that is well known in its role, like the tourist guide *riga this week*. so we used the layout of this tourist guide and filled it with our own contents. so, again we created this contradiction between the expectation and this reality that it is something different.

raimund minichbauer: which image of riga is being produced in the guide?

emils rode: with this catalogue, we wanted to make a statement and also to give some guidance, that it is not so clear what in riga is interesting and what is not interesting; that there is still something to add about this. we put the focus exactly on the areas, which are usually assumed that there is nothing interesting in them, which was a reversal of the centre and periphery opposition. usually when you ask people, what is interesting in riga, they would probably answer: the old town, but they would never think that there is something interesting in their neighbourhood. but actually these outlying neighbourhoods can tell more about riga, especially because they have no outside attention, so they develop according to their own rules, and they have some kind of authenticity - real or imagined, but they do have it. it is exactly because of that,

⁴ see photos at: <http://www.lcca.lv/en/repdar.html>

⁵ *psychogeographic riga this week # 63a, september 2003*; see publications at the lcca-website: <http://www.lcca.lv/en/publikacijas.html>

that they can be interesting - not only to observers from outside, but also local residents.

raimund minichbauer: what does it mean in the local context?

emils rode: that is your *dérive* basically, that you think, it is your city, but then all of a sudden you can find parts of it, which you totally don't recognise. it is all a question of attention and of sensitivity. you can just pass through this neighbourhood without paying any attention or you can make this effort and notice what is actually interesting. to summarise, it is a kind of self-reflection exercise for the people in riga, to see riga, but from another perspective. and that is a tool, let's say how to make life more interesting by just adding to your own perspective without changing any conditions, but only your attention.

raimund minichbauer: a quite subjective experience...

emils rode: i think this is also one of the characteristics of psychogeography that it is always a subjective thing. which also means, that it is already an oxymoron to talk about a psychogeographic guide, because a subjective vision of the city can't really be given to other people as a guide. it can only be an impulse for them to start and look and see and discover something other for themselves. of course you can use it as a guide by itself, but rather it is a kind of thinking, that you should look more attentively into these neighbourhoods and that you can find unexpected things.

raimund minichbauer: the situationist's concept of psychogeography also has certain political implications, how did you deal with this aspect?

emils rode: it has been 40 years or more since the psychogeographers' ideas, and since all these events of the 1950ies and 60ies. i think that many ideas that were in a way revolutionary, including this concept of the situationists, were reappropriated by capitalism and integrated into the mainstream. so, we recognise that they have no revolutionary content, really. we use psychogeography more as a tool or as a theory to explain how our lives are influenced by physical environments. so, really we are already disillusioned enough not to think that you can do a revolutionary change in society and create a non-hierarchical society, but you can use these tools for critical thinking about your own conditions of life, and that can be a useful exercise - so that is the psychogeography now, 40 years later.

raimund minichbauer: thank you very much!