

**Annica
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State of Mind

Annica Karlsson Rixon and Anna Viola Hallberg

Acquiring direction

“Life itself’ is often imagined in terms of ‘having a direction’, which decides from the present what the future should be. After all, to acquire a direction takes time, even if it feels as if we have always followed one line or another, or as if we ‘began’ and ‘ended’ at the same place. Indeed, it is by following some lines more than others that we might acquire our sense of who it is that we are.”

Sara Ahmed¹

The writing of this text started at the end of July, a few days after installing *State of Mind*, for the first time, in the context of EuroPride 08 in Stockholm.² The setting for this opening forms an accentuated framework for the narrative, it becomes a component of history writing and an illustrative element for media in the reporting on the event focusing on the themes of the festival; “breaking borders”³, bridging politics, culture and entertainment.

State of Mind consolidates to a trilogy, together with *Resonance* and *Code of Silence*. In different ways these lens-based art installations cast light on aspects of socially and culturally constructed identity-based groups in contemporary society. Photography and video are used in combination to expand on the separate histories of the two media with regard to interviews and portraits in documentary genres. This is the point of departure for all three installations. As for the overall narrative, the topics of how and why different groupings construct networks and communities in order to achieve a sense of belonging are in focus, as well as the conditions and necessities for forming the community. The projects look at the social conventions family, love and career, dealing with power relations such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and class. The

1. Sara Ahmed. *Queer Phenomenology*. Duke University Press. 2006.

2. Kulturhuset - Stockholm, July 25 – August 25, 2008. *State of Mind* is exhibited together with *Resonance* at ROSPHOTO - the Russian state center of photography in St. Petersburg, September 5 – October 19, 2008. A tour is planned for Kiev and Kharkov, Ukraine in 2009 and then to move onwards.

3. The theme for EuroPride in Stockholm 2008 is “*Swedish Sin, Breaking Borders*”.

method of collecting the material in fieldwork is similar in the three projects, but the questions asked and issues raised are specific to each segment of the installations. Portraiture and personally based stories are central. The trilogy is presented as three separate art installations, which co-exist and cross-inform each other. They reflect upon civil rights issues and the idea of being safe and productive within society, working in the space between personal choice and social expectations. Memory, narration, visual representation and oral history are central. In each of the three works a different group is approached that relates to the artists' personal lives. *Resonance*⁴, our first collaboration, is based on a network of peers belonging to a successful generation of artists and curators. They are all women who made an entrance onto the Swedish and Danish art scene in the 1990's, and now have international careers. On one level *Resonance* is an examination of the Scandinavian welfare state, and in more specific terms, the impact of the conditions it creates for the portrayed women to make it on the art scene. In *Code of Silence*⁵ this is a sibling group of five who grew up on a small farm in rural Gothenburg, Sweden. The farm had to face the challenge of major cultural reforms in the nineteenth century, but remained intact. It became a target for expropriation during the 1950's and 70's to make way for the reforms involved in building the modern Sweden. Hence, it remained an object of possible interest for the national cultural heritage. The farm was finally demolished in 2004. *Code of Silence* is based on oral history, memories told by the siblings infringing the UN's Declaration of Human Rights paragraph 17 relating to everyone's right to a home. In addition this installation includes a large number of private and official documents such as hand-written wills, receipts from selling milk, and letters to the King of Sweden. *State of Mind* explores everyday life and the boundaries between ethics, legislation, prejudice and civic expectations in the LGBTQ⁶ life of St. Petersburg, Russia. It emphasizes individuals identifying as lesbians or bisexual women.

To the records

“What can I tell you except the truth? We do not have a history. We are not even visible to each other.”

Harmony Hammond⁷

Who would we be if we placed ourselves in St. Petersburg for a while? Could we get in touch with, take part in, a community? Get a sense of belonging? As artists who frequently travel in the profession, we have a kind of international community, meaning we can tap into places because of shared interests and common spaces. The same goes for a queer scene. But for two Swedish artists, with a past in the US, what kind of network would be available in a country geographically much closer than America, but with a language and cultural codes that are quite unfamiliar?

State of Mind was, from the beginning, approached as a research project, allowing us to “look into” things without the demand for a specific end product such as an artwork or a film. This zone of exploration was made feasible by a stipend and an art residency, an apartment for two months in St. Petersburg in the fall of 2006. When we were there we detected a lack of representation of both a noticeable contemporary art scene and a unified LGBTQ scene. This was

4. *Resonance* was exhibited at Norrköping Art Museum, Göteborgs Konsthall and Uppsala Museum of Art during 2006-2007.

5. *Code of Silence* will be ready to be launched in 2009.

6. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer

7. Harmony Hammond. *Lesbian Artists*. 1978. *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*. Routledge. 2003

at a time when the Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya was killed, xenophobia and orthodox extremists were claiming a presence in the streets, and through this also in the media. Coinciding with these phenomena, another major change was occurring, the international community was holding back, or was limited in its ways of acting. Neither the support nor the belief in the future were what they were at the time around Perestroika. In this somewhat turbulent time, economic growth in St. Petersburg reached about 11% per year. What could be sensed though was tiredness, specifically amongst “the children of the Soviet”. For a time, there was so much hope in the new era, but this suddenly got out of hand, while the times turned in another direction. Where did the hope go? We decided to look into this via our borrowed group identity, that of the Russian LGBTQ scene in the city of St. Petersburg. And later on to participate in setting up representation for the group. One of the main conditions for the making of *State of Mind* was this double positioning, on the one hand, entering as outsiders with the perspective of two foreigners who are visitors to a country where they have no command of the language or the cultural codes, but at the same time with an insider’s access to a group of lesbian and bisexual women.

State of Mind has been in progress since the fall of 2005, when we initiated contact with a couple in St. Petersburg on an international matchmaking site. They were looking for international friends, we were looking for a pre-understanding of life in “Pieter”. This gave us a chance to brief our impressions prior to getting there, but also upon arrival, it gave us something to bounce our thinking against. We went to St Petersburg for a week in July 2006 to meet up with the couple. This first visit gave us a platform for making the five-minute one-channel work, *State of Mind – Prologue* (2006)⁸. The next important forum was the reception held by the Swedish General Consulate in St. Petersburg in the fall of 2006. This served as an opportunity to invite an array of guests to whom we could present our previous work and get the much-needed authority and approval of the project from the General Consul himself. Due to competition between various groups, and issues of leadership, it could have been that, if we had selected whom to work with, others might have chosen not to work with us. Our method was to encourage everyone present at the reception to engage with us and to plan for an interview. We did not actively select anyone, they themselves decided to be included, and to what degree. Some only in the video part, some in photographs, others became discussion partners without participating visually in the project. Much of the fall 2006 was spent talking to people representing some of the activist groups in St. Petersburg. We still left the final presentation of the project open.

Returning in the summer of 2007 for a three weeks session, we were able to work much faster. Many people now knew about us, and the project, but also from our standpoint, we knew so much more about how we wanted to conduct the interviews. One point was to maintain a high level of presence in the “talking heads”. The aim was to create a sense that the interviewees are talking directly to the person listening in the art installation. In order to achieve this we left out the process of interpretation during the interviews, the specifics of the material first became known to us when we were back home working with a translator. We also abandoned the idea of an indoor environment, and took to the streets and parks of choice of the persons being portrayed both in the video segment and in the group photographs. It felt important to show people in public space, as we had experienced that gay women are actually quite visible in the streets of St. Petersburg⁹. The selection principle was an arm’s-length away, both from us

8. *State of Mind – Prologue* was shown at Pride and the City, Stockholm Pride, Gallerian, Stockholm, July 31 – August 6, 2006, and at the out door group exhibition Inside Out, Brunnsparcken, Gothenburg, August 4 – 13, 2006.
9. Something that differs from Sweden, at least historically, when it comes to lesbians. See: Arne Nilsson and Margareta Lindholm. *En annan stad*. Alfabetabokförlag AB, 2002



Alya:

“On the streets I really do feel completely free, because this is not anything shameful and I am a normal person. I mean, I am not trying to flaunt it, but I don’t hide it, I am the way that I am, and if people don’t accept it, it’s their right to not interact with me. It never occurred to me to be ashamed of it, I am just... just natural. I came to St Petersburg from a provincial town, quite a small one. All people know each other, and the situation in my family is that my parents are aware. They know about my women, they knew practically from the very beginning. As soon as I realized it about myself, I immediately told my mom. Problems of course did arise, but now everything is okay. But since it’s a very small town, this doesn’t get outside of my family, because my mom, no matter how much she cares about me, still considers it a shame. And relatives do know, but everything outside the family is covered in secret.”



Alona:

“The situation in the country, as is usual for our country, is complicated. As far as lesbian rights, they are denied in many ways, but the main discrimination is for the same-sex marriage and for adoption of children. Rights to give birth to a child and register the child to yourself and your girlfriend. Rights to go abroad, which is very important, being in a couple with a woman - it’s practically impossible. Because if you are going abroad to work, your girlfriend will not be allowed to go with you, because she is not a family member.”



Rima:

“When lesbian community was just organized, when the movement just began, the government practically didn’t pay any attention to it - it was the Yeltsin period. There was a good amount of freedoms, and gays and lesbians actively got together, and there was time up till the present day to find each other and begin to organize themselves into some kind of a movement. But currently, when the politics, the government changed, now the government became tougher on its citizens, and some freedoms were taken away, including the freedom of speech. Currently it’s obvious that there is an attitude in the politics against gays, lesbians, and homosexuality in general. This is not yet done by means of legislature, since still the Article for sodomy is removed from the Russian criminal code. But it’s done through various Russian orthodox and Russophile social organizations.”

and from the growing group. We said that we wanted a broad representation in terms of age, occupation and lifestyle. One of the visual impressions we knew we wanted to leave behind in the installation was strands of networks, people coming together. These were the conditions to pursue in order to present an indexical collaboration between both the activist groups and the selected individuals in St. Petersburg, and for that matter in the cities to which the exhibition will travel.

Leaving Traces

“You are touching upon the most important dilemma facing any viewer of a work of art: whether to gain concrete knowledge and then leave, or to immerse yourself in what is offered.”

Ilya Kabakov¹⁰

State of Mind aims to encourage a discussion of intercultural perspectives and identity politics. It inquires into topics such as shortcomings vs. possibilities, belonging vs. alienation, ascribed vs. selected identity. It provides a quite exclusive view of a selected group in St. Petersburg and shows evidence of stamina, sincerity and activism, revealing stories of contemporary city life for individuals identifying as lesbians, bisexual and/or people working with LGBTQ-related issues in Russia. In the visualization of *State of Mind*, the video components are to be viewed as an ever-changing group portrait with the river Neva as a backdrop, a constellation that is unlikely to be the same twice. This creates a link between the photographic group portraits and the more loosely orchestrated time-based video portraits. The etching effect of the stills contrasts with the flow of imagery from the seven monitors, while the ambient sound from the video installation travels back to the photographs. On the monitors 38 people talk freely about politics, East-West, private situations and confrontations, as well as their view of the future. Issues of leadership, democracy, community and women's rights are central. The stories portray both general and personal aspects of everyday life. The interviewees range in age from 17-67, and include students, journalists, psychologists, pole dancers, physicians, office workers, drivers, poets, lawyers, academics, business owners, rock stars, housewives et cetera. The large-format photographs portray families, friends and lovers, most of them activists working on their special issues. These can be home performances or parties, video distribution, book publishing or organizing a discussion forum on the Internet.

A number of contradictory dilemmas were faced when working with *State of Mind*, one being the complexity of working with documentary material, as the field of documentary photography and film is rightfully questioned for exploitation and for making claims to “the truth”. Another challenge was approaching a group that has hardly been visually represented. What kind of image would we give? In addition, gays in Russia are living without legal or social rights, and for that reason many fear to be open about their orientation as they get close to everyday settings such as family or the workplace. *State of Mind* is a consequence of a long-term trust-building process, and this trust demands great responsibility in return. Touring the exhibition in Russia, for some in all the post-Soviet countries, means that a number of the visuals have

10. Ilya Kabakov, *In conversation with Robert Storr*, 1995, In Ilya Kabakov, Phaidon Press Limited, 1998.

to be removed for these venues, and for the videos, and replaced by a neutral image in order to be able to keep the voices. This is something we need to be constantly updated on, and it means that those portrayed have to be contacted before every new venue, since things might change along the line. Someone might get a new job, another may have decided to come out and be open with their family, the political situation in Russia might change. This is a complicated work process, both socially and workwise, but it creates an opening for including a number of interesting life stories, and the possibility of providing an impression of the LGBTQ scene in St. Petersburg that is rich and complex.

From the very beginning, *State of Mind* was an open research project, but, it took us deep into issues of human rights, community and activist work. One of the long-term aims is to encourage an amalgamation of the work of agents who operate separately, and to contribute to the forming of a coalition between individuals and organizations. The installation is now travelling with the *Lezzy Think Tank*, a forum for a continued dialogue about *State of Mind*, with a focus on a relay that passes on experiences from one exhibition city to another. *State of Mind* is used both as visualization and documentation of the present, but might also function as a spark for exchanges between existing structures.

The following artworks:

- No 1 State of Mind (Muchabad and Alona, St Petersburg, 2007)**
Type-C print, wood frame, plexi glass, 131 x 106 x 5 cm
- No 2 State of Mind (Marina, Senya, Lena, St Petersburg, 2007)**
Type-C print, wood frame, plexi glass, 93,5 x 76 x 5 cm
- No 3 State of Mind (Irina, Ilja, Sveta and Oksána, St Petersburg, 2007)**
Type-C print, wood frame, plexi glass, 131 x 106 x 5 cm
- No 4 State of Mind, Installation view, Galleri K1, Kulturhuset, Stockholm 2008**
Seven 19" open frame monitors SD w/sound (headphones),
one projection HD w/sound (ambient)

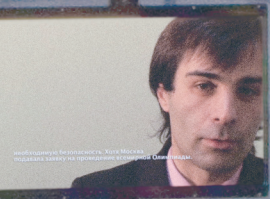












Interview

Mika Hannula: Let's take a hypothetical situation. You are both sitting on a long-haul flight and the person next to you wants to make conversation, and asks what do you do professionally. What do you answer?

Annica Karlsson Rixon: I would say I am an artist, a photographer and part of a doctoral programme in artistic research at the University of Gothenburg.

MH: You would say all those things in the first sentence?

AKR: Yes, I would. I tend to be very specific about what I do. But if I don't feel like talking and if someone asks what kind of photos I make, I say portraiture. Then the reply is mostly like: "Oh, that's beautiful," and then I can get back to the book that I was reading.

MH: And Anna?

Anna Viola Hallberg: My answer would be that I am an artist, but I would say that I am also a museologist, adding that my interests lie in the intersection where art and society meet. If they ask what kind of artist, I would start by describing how I work with materials based on my immediate surroundings and that we use the installation format in which we investigate the boundaries between moving images and the frozen frame in photographs.

MH: And how do people respond to that?

AVH: Since we started out slowly, I think the notion of working and interacting with society is something a lot of people can grasp.

MH: When you say immediate surroundings, what do you mean?

AKR: In these three projects that we are collaborating on, we have chosen to look into three different communities, or I would rather say ideas of communities, starting out with one of my projects that goes back to the end of the 90's. I was looking into my own artist community, and working then solely with photography. When I started to collaborate with Anna, that also meant introducing moving images and sound into this project. The second group we deal with is the family, and the third one has to do with LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Queer) networks, not working with people we know previously, but with people we have had access to through a sense of the community that we have internationally, through common, shared interests.

MH: OK, those three communities you mentioned (artists, family, sexual orientation, or thematically as work, family and love) in your immediate surroundings. How did it, not all, but your collaboration start?

AKR: It started with us talking about these things, discovering that we share certain interests, but also recognizing that we have complementary skills. It basically began with Anna helping me out with my show *Today Tomorrow Forever*, but she very soon started to be involved in the creative processes in the making of *Resonance*, which was shown in the exhibition. It became a collaboration. Actually, it started more or less at the same time we met as a couple.

AVH: I moved back from New York, or not exactly, I was doing a project in Stockholm when I met Annica, and realized we had many things in common that were parallel. However, we saw them from different angles that sort of enhanced the topic. That became a ground for argumentation. We had an opportunity to go and see the Istanbul Biennial, and that became a place where we talked a lot about different video artists and their projects. At the same time, we knew that your [nodding towards AKR] show was coming up, and we knew that you wanted to work with the transparency of images using projections.

MH: When did you meet?

AKR: In 2003.

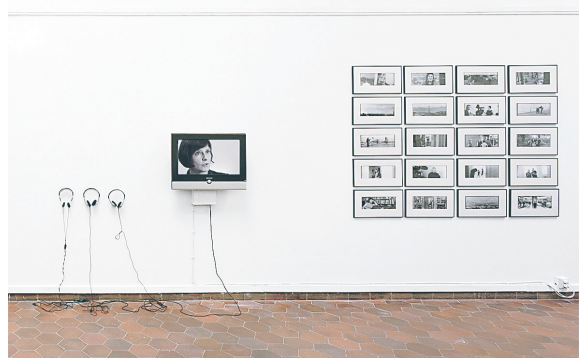
MH: OK, it's clear how the first of the three projects has a background in Annica's previous work, but were the other two themes of the whole thing there before you met, or did they evolve and get articulated through you working together?

AKR: I did a photo-based installation on the family theme for the 2nd Gothenburg art biennial, dealing with my parents and their generation. We did pick up that theme from there and started to discuss oral history, while also discovering a lot of documents, when my grandmother passed away in 2004. The third project, *State of Mind*, grew totally out of our common interests and discussions. Even if the two other projects follow on form what I did before, I view them as completely new, something that we have created with new materials today. I always work like that, never starting a completely new project, but picking up on something I have done before. I guess everyone does that in one sense or another.

AVH: Part of this has to do with the fact that I moved back from the US, and that Annica moved back to Sweden four years prior to me. When you shift your location from your selected exile, and you move back to the place where you started out, you recognize how you have changed and the place has changed, and not necessarily in the way you were prepared for. That's why we started to discuss the necessities of life, which, for example, are work and love, memory, dreams and hopes, and all these things. So I would say that these three projects are based on us meeting, of course, but also on the fact that both of us had been



Resonance, Installation
Installation view, Norrköping Art Museum, Norrköping, 2006
Two projections HD w/sound and baryt prints,
wood frames, glass.



Resonance, Conversations
Installation view, Today Tomorrow Forever,
Göteborgs Konsthall, Göteborg, 2006
One monitor HD, w/sound (headphones), twenty baryt-
prints, metal frames, glass

living in two cultures that on the surface might seem similar, but which are very different – especially if you belong to something that the society calls a sub-culture, which for us is queer culture.

MH: How long did you stay in the US, starting with Anna?

AVH: I went back and forth a lot, but for approximately seven years, starting from 1996. I used to work as a script teacher in film writing in Stockholm and Uppsala, I had done that ever since I was 26 or so, I felt like I wanted to move on. Then I worked with a filmmaker, Mia Engberg, in San Francisco. We did a couple of documentaries for Swedish television, focusing on queer people. I have that trace of documentarism in me as well, and interest in people, interacting with different parts of society. When I came to New York, I realized that it is a very expensive city to live in, and knew that my background in telling stories could be useful at that point of the development of the Internet businesses. I worked as a creative producer at a big advertising agency. It was a high-end, branding-orientated company focusing on youth culture.

MH: How many years did you survive in that environment?

AVH: Sounds like I did military service, but I did something like four years there. But it's a fair question. However, the point is that, at the time, there were huge amounts of money in that industry; there were also the elements of experiment going on. Then there was the demand for telling a story in a different way that is not linear and all that. Then, actually, in 2000, the economy started to get really bad in the US, which hit our industry heavily, and the level of experiment was cut back. It eventually went back to being more classic marketing again. And I am not a marketing person, so I had nothing to do in that business any longer. They were, nevertheless, extremely interesting times, since we were right there, riding that wave just before the Internet bubble burst.

At the same time, I was working with Barbara Hammer, because I felt I had a need to address other issues. This dates back to a student once asking me in Uppsala – I was teaching Swedish film to foreign students – if there are any gay and lesbian movies being produced in Sweden, and back then one of the first ones, *Väninnor*, was being made. I helped consult on that production, being very familiar with it, and this student was very thankful, and then she asked me if I was familiar with the works of Barbara Hammer. I said no, then the student went back to the US and sent me the film *Nitrate Kisses*. It is absolutely fantastic how Barbara Hammer deals with 16 mm film, as it was back then. I wrote a letter to Barbara saying that I would like to become her assistant. So, parallel to doing the advertising agency stuff, I worked as a co-producer and assistant director for Barbara Hammer on a feature-length documentary called *History Lessons*. Barbara has been extremely helpful in my development in the artistic way of looking at film.

MH: What about Annica, how long did you spend in the US?

AKR: About five years, moving back here in 1999, so it's been a while. I was there for the first time when I was 19, so I have a long relationship with the US and people over there. It feels like a close connection.

MH: When you look back now, how important were those years in America for you, in terms of forming or focusing who you are and what you do?

AKR: For me it was tremendously important. I was looking for something and I found it. This is strange to say, but it's true. I was new in the art world in Sweden and I did not have an art-education background, I came from a tradition of documentary photography, but found a place in the art world where I felt I could work. On the other hand, I very soon felt kind of trapped in that environment. Then I was given a chance to go back to San Francisco in 1994, I got an artist in residency grant, and continued by going to a Masters program at Cal Arts, meeting people who were discussing things in a way I was interested in.

MH: What were these topics?

AKR: It was a combination of making and thinking about art. There is a long tradition at Cal Arts of artists teaching in a way that art and theory interact. It did not give me a correct education in the sense of a basic level, but I do have a specific education in things I am interested in. So it was about me finding myself as an artist. Then there was the freedom and challenge of leaving the society I was very familiar with. It was hard, but very inspiring, for both making art and personally.

AVH: For me it was definitely an opportunity to define and redefine myself. I also spent a lot of time travelling to Los Angeles when I was younger, but when I moved to New York I discovered an environment that I summarize as allowing, generous and competitive. For me that is a very healthy climate, and it is a climate in which people are allowed to try things, something that sometimes in different scenes in Sweden can be a little bit on the low scale. I think the scenes here are so small that there is not that much space for experiment. I am predominantly now talking about film, but also in general, people are more protective.

MH: Was the time in the US also important in terms of the sub-culture that you identify yourself with?

AKR: I have been inspired by the grass-root movements in the States connected to anything, but especially in connection to the art world and the LGBTQ community, not to forget the LGBTQ community within the art world. Maybe not so much when I lived there, but as a kind of after-effect when moving back to Sweden.

AVH: I think the roots of this, what we are so interested in, lie in the American tradition of town hall meetings. If there is a problem, people come together and they discuss it and they confront each other, trying to define common goals, instead of separating out the differences, and this perspective of defining common goals is something that can make very different people work together. Since we both have this experience of defining ourselves with regard to American culture, for us it was interesting to think and see who we would be if we did not have any of the cultural codes or the language - and that's why we are looking at Russia and St. Petersburg. Therefore, this whole *State of Mind* project was

possible because of the curiosity, and the investment made in the time in America, where we had to redefine ourselves, realizing we are different and see ourselves differently in Sweden due to our time in America. The question was: what would we see if we moved to a culture that is much closer to Stockholm than New York or Los Angeles, about which we actually know much less – and how could we tap into a potential LGBT community? Would there be such a community that would be supportive to us? Because in America you can always contact any LGBTQ organization and you will have access to a network. Like if you are an artist, you can contact another artist and have that fact together, that you are both artists, you do not have to discuss it, but you have a network, a certain kind of safety line.

MH: Good, that brought State of Mind into this, but let's not go there yet. Instead, let's stay a bit with the LGTB network. Does it exist in the same way in Sweden?

AKR: For me the network and platform that I mainly connected with was artists. But about the LGBTQ issues, yes, it does, but I think there is a difference in how things are discussed. I have a feeling that in the early 90's there was a discussion on a specific kind of feminism, for example, but then that passed away and something else took its place. There is more of a continuity and ongoing discussion in the US, I think. Once again, in a small place like Sweden there is often only room for one thing at a time. But that is changing.

AVH: I don't know. The funny thing is that I can't really say that I made use of the network in New York, but I was in the middle of it, and if you are in the middle of it, you do not need to define it. Definitions are needed when something is missing or not going in the right direction. But New York being what it was, this was not the case, you have your structures and you can follow them. Meeting and working with Barbara Hammer, who deals with history writing and representation in an experimental format, is a part of being on the LGBTQ network. But I think in Sweden it's in a different stage, even if it is happening more now. And it is definitely an ongoing issue, like if you listen to the news, people are not as specific here in terms of how they formulate things in relation to these issues. It becomes like a negative statement when they try to put the emphasis on something. One thing that keeps coming back to us is how in Sweden the LGBT scene has not started to protect that segment of society, whereas in America that segment is very prominent, the way LGBTQ people are portrayed.

AKR: One example is that in the Swedish media you can say that AIDS is a huge threat for homosexuals. And that could be argued if you are a man, but there are not that many gay women with AIDS. That kind of unawareness of language use is typical, a shallow, but clear example.

AVH: The difference is also that the US has been a multi-cultural society much longer, and the consequence of this is that you have the need to define yourself as a part of that. Because if you are all alike, there is no clear need to define yourself.

MH: Going into the State of Mind project, how did it begin?

AKR: We did talk a lot about situating ourselves someplace where we are not familiar with the language or culture. Then it turned out to be St. Petersburg, Russia kind of being the opposite of America. It's an enormous country that has been affecting our picture of the world without us knowing much at all about it. There were also things happening in Russia, things we read in the news and on the Net that seemed to be a political backlash. The first time we started to connect with people there was in 2004.

AVH: I was then working for an advertising firm, who did the official films for Stockholm Pride, which are basically music videos. At that time, I started, out of pure curiosity, to look into how things are in Russia, like what's going on in the East. I have been following newsletter developments from both the human rights activist and the gay and lesbian activists' side since 2003. Parallel to this, Annica and I had, a minor detail though, a curiosity about harbour cities, because in harbour cities you always have foreigners coming in, and the foreigner comes with goods, i.e. good things. The idea of a foreigner is part of the structure: who we are and how we are received as foreigners. At first we wanted to have three harbour cities like St. Petersburg, for example, Istanbul and Torshamn, but once we started to explore the critical state that Russia was in, with a worsened human rights situation, we actually got consumed by the city and the situation. We made a lot of contacts and through this the project changed. The first time we went there, we did a prologue, that was the summer of 2006, spending a week there. Prior to that, we had a one-year e-mail conversation with a lesbian couple living there, learning about their experiences. One is an artist and the other a professor at a prestigious university. Both of them are frightened of losing their positions. We could not film their faces, but wanted to have and hear their stories, that is why we chose the emblem of the city as an image and a background for their story. Then, in the fall, we went there for an art residency, applying to do just research to determine if there is a formed scene, or not. What we found out was that there is not one platform; there are several small communities with their own agendas.



MH: Consumed by the city? What do you mean?

AVH: It is also about the way Annica and I work together. We get extremely involved with the people we work with. And since in this project people are risking a lot, it comes down to trust. It is all about trust. The people we meet invest a lot of trust in us. This trust also made us invest even more of ourselves back, becoming a spiral effect. We have this forehand notion that this society works in a certain way, but it worked in a way that we could not really grasp. Both through its beauty and its political state we got captivated by the city, and also the people have been so helpful and friendly. The project has had its own life and world.

AKR: It has taken us a long time to figure out how we can work with this project. We have constantly been working with and a through a community and a network that we have been building up. We don't speak Russian, and most of

State of Mind, Prologue
Installation view, Group exhibition, Inside Out,
Brunnsparken Gothenburg, 2006
One monitor HD w/sound, 4m 53s

just have to respect this, of course, by not including these photos and by replacing their image with other footage, an image of the Palace Bridge, a symbol of the city, in the video installation, but still keeping their voices and the translations. It's a tricky situation and we are a bit anxious how the work will be received there. It could be considered quite radical, it's impossible to judge in advance. However, we do not promote the LGBT issues too hard in St Petersburg, knowing that this information will be spread informally within the community anyhow.

MH: It seems to be that, in combination with the dedication you both have to working on this, the awareness you have of the assumptions and the limitations of the project are, in fact, turning to your advantage, becoming the productive frame that shapes the project.

AVH: In one sense, we are both notorious planners, but the meeting with Russian society, the planning part is much more spontaneous. For us to learn to trust, that took a while. At first it was a shock, but it was a learning experience. We were prepared to work in those conditions, carrying very little equipment and that becomes a trade-off. We also decided to work with fairly wide frames, in order to get some of the essence of St. Petersburg into the background, which is not seen as a suitable thing to do with video, but that's what we decided to do. These negotiations between the pros and cons are a core part of our process.



AKR: Or like when we decided to do these portraits using a large-format camera, asking people to climb up onto a roof, knowing we had maximum of 1½ hours to make the photo. It is a hassle, but also fun. But sure, it is at some point very important to realize the limitations of the project, and then go on from there and not worry about it, but use it.

MH: So it's like the principle of learning to follow ...

AVH: Hahahaa. We did not even talk about it. The conditions were like a slap in your face, like saying: if we are going to do this, we have to be flexible and follow the life in St. Petersburg.

MH: OK, here comes the big question. My question is not what you have learned about the situation in St. Petersburg, but what, so far, has this process taught you about yourselves?

AKR: In this project we do have an insider position through having a kind of natural access to a group of people, but yet an outsider position, as we come from a quite different place, but more then anything by actually being artists doing work on this. I think it is a challenge to move into this area of art making that is strongly political; dealing with documentarism, dealing with other people's lives in the presentation. I don't exactly know what I have learned, but I have learned that it is do-able and it is very meaningful. Like in any situation, you never have full control, but here it's obvious how much we had to rely on other people.

State of Mind
Installation view, Galleri K1, Kulturhuset, Stockholm, 2008
Eleven C-prints, wood frames, plexi glass.

AVH: We are not activists, but we are using a lot of the activists' strategies in the way this project is done. We are collaborating with activists, and the experience of collaborating together for a common goal, learning that things can actually happen, that is very important.

AKR: One important aspect of the whole thing is that we are doing it all ourselves, all the production, the touring etc. We are taking the risk, for example, by bringing the work into such a specific context as the Stockholm Pride/EuroPride structure. But I actually really appreciate this framework, being able to organize two seminars in connection with this, inviting people from Russia for a lecture and a think tank, discussing the same issues as in the videos, about the community and how to make cross-border collaborations work. This time, the work is so much more and larger than just an installation. This has expanded into a new way of doing art for me, not being so super-protective of the so-called high-art quality.

AVH: There is an interesting thing going on here. *Resonance* is also a very political piece, but since it deals with an artists' community, it is not read like that. But when we present *State of Mind*, the art-world people immediately ask if it is an activist's piece, just because of the topic. For us it is no more or less political than the other works we do. That was a very interesting discovery.

MH: Let's get to the topic of a moving still and the frozen frame?

AVH: Yes, that's what I called it. It's about discovering the tension between a moving image and a still image, and how they can cross-inform each other, in which the moving image almost becomes a still and the still becomes more dynamic. That is something we have been exploring in these two works – and also working three-dimensionally.

State of Mind, with its several screens, is not synced. There are seven independent screens, but at the same time, these screens are still dependent on each other. This out of syncness creates a dynamic between the different screens, since there is no one single rhythm in them. The reason it's screened with headphones is that you have to make a choice: which one of the seven persons do you walk up to and engage with?

MH: Two more questions. Here's the tricky one: how would you define research in your project and processes?

AKR: My personal interest is the relationship between representation and documentarism, how we have to deal with these questions differently in each project, what choices we make and why. This has to do with the medium of photography, an indexical medium, with being interested to discuss it, but not limiting the work to be simply media critique, but stressing the awareness of possibly ways to deal with these issues in each particular case. It is an inspiring challenge.

AVH: In these three different projects we do work with research in different ways. In *Code of Silence* (family), which we are about to do now, it really digs into the archive and memory, in *State of Mind*, it's a

Code of Silence
Production shot 2007



the people we work with don't speak English. We depend on people helping us. It has been very time consuming. We went there to talk to some people, but ended up working with more than 40 people. Due to the specific circumstances we don't always grasp things on a deep level. So we decided to make it a broad project, talking to a lot of people. We have some long, in-depth interviews, but most focus on a few specific subjects.

AVH: There is a humbleness in St. Petersburg that I think is very interesting. It is a pretty harsh society, but people are humble, ready to reach out a helping hand. And this is what we see in the whole of the city, something that was there already in Soviet times.

AKR: There is also a great interest in international contacts.

MH: Let's get into details. Can you say something more about these interview situations, which are based on trust, but in which you have no common language? How do you survive in a situation like that?

AKR: We worked differently in the first visits in 2006 compared to when we came back in 2007. In the second round, we knew what we wanted to do. We had the trust from building up a network, one person helping us to the next, and also giving us feedback on the project. The second session is based on some simple questions about people's lives and what their beliefs are. We did not even translate these answers on site, so we did not really know what the answers were. We had someone on site checking that everything went okay in terms of the subject matter. We preferred direct talk to the camera, instead of long conversations with me. The people are talking straight to the camera, to the viewer. Not translating on site was taking a risk. And it was not until last fall, when Polina, our translator, came and helped us to translate, that we found out what the answers were.

AVH: Another important thing, and something we have in common is that we see the goal, and we don't see the hurdles on the way, so to speak. This creates a situation in which a lot of other people would not go ahead. For instance, when we went to St. Petersburg last summer, 2007, we had nothing scheduled and no translator, but we went there with the confidence that we could actually solve the situation. That has been the beautiful thing with this project. It has solved itself. This comes back to the idea of trust, that dual thing that we do something we strongly feel for, and people are participating in something that they think is worthwhile. It is a give and take. It is also that we basically worked alone, only the two of us. This made us very flexible, to seize the moment.

MH: How do you work with the materials that you have gathered?

AVH: With the filmed footage, we transcribe and translate everything. Then we individually go through the text material, circle round what we think is interesting and then we see where we have common ground and different opinions, then we discuss them, and from that point on I go on editing. In this case, we have a format, and then you just fill it in. Also, before the final selection, we discuss the core content with some of the advisors, people like Olga Lipovskaya.

AKR: At a very early point, we decided to have the group portrait as a visual idea to work with, also because we found that St. Petersburg is divided into a lot of smaller groups. I think our way of working together is very smooth. We share a lot of common interests, but it also has to do with the fact that we respect each other. We have a basic understanding of how we want to do things, and then there are some things that I completely leave to Anna because she is better at it, and there are things she leaves for me because that's closer to my skills. It is very important to leave things. We do not sit there and work through every frame. It's not that I always agree on every step – about sound or whatever – but you have to leave that freedom there. This is how we work.

MH: How much raw material do you have?

AVH: There is 16 hours from the fall of 2006, and from the summer of 2007, there are about 40 interviews, some with audio only that we ended up not using. Together it comes to about 45 hours of interviews in Russian, English or Swedish, all transcribed. And then, of course, we have all the photographic material, both analogue 4x5 negatives and digital snapshots.

MH: Your description of the project carrying itself forward is a sign that you must have been doing something right. On the same note, in this kind of very complex work, there must also have been some hiccups along the road?

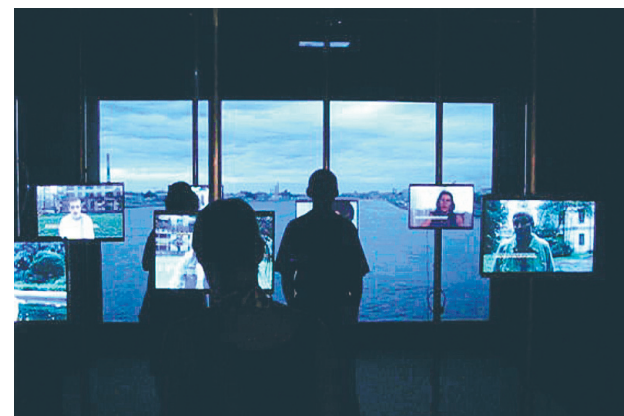
AKR: There are very specific limitations for this project. It would have been very different if we had known how to speak Russian, and would have been able to talk back in the interviews. Whether that would have been better for the project, I do not know, but there are clear limitations here that we have to be very aware of.

But hiccups... There have been a lot of practical dilemmas; like in the fall it was so cold we could not work outdoors. Then we are also dealing with a very specific situation in terms of people's integrity and fear, and this is something very present in this project, working with documentary material. I personally have been avoiding this genre for many years because I find it so complicated to play in the field of representation. Because that is what we do! Whatever ideas you might have, that person who sits there and talks, is actually that person talking.

It is complicated, because, on the other hand, we are working with a group that is not represented at all visually, being lesbians, internationally speaking, but especially in a place like Russia. We have in one sense made a very heroic work, which can be criticized from some point of view. The third aspect here, something we already mentioned, is that some of the people we talked with actually fear being part of this for security reasons, or simply because they have not come out to their parents yet.

State of Mind will first be shown in Stockholm at Kulturhuset, opening during EuroPride in July 2008, then we will move it to St. Petersburg, and there we have to handle the installation a bit differently. It will be at ROSPHOTO, the state centre of photography. Some of the participants don't feel comfortable with being recognized in their hometown, maybe seven of them, if we ask now, but when we ask closer to the exhibition, it might be different. We

State of Mind
Installation view, Galleri K1, Kulturhuset,
Stockholm 2008
Seven 19" open frame monitors SD w/sound
(headphones), one projection HD w/sound (ambient)



laboratory, we do not know what's going to happen, we are experimenting with very many factors. In *Resonance*, it's closer in a way to journalism, asking questions of a specific group of people, and its format is close to documentary. We have these three levels and when they are all done, it's going to be very interesting to see what the reasons are for selecting different strategies and what those strategies are in the end. But we can't come to this conclusion before we do all of them. It becomes clearer through the process, with different parts crystallizing each other.

MH: Let us finish with a different type or kind of hiccup. It is evident that you both work really well together, sharing the same interests and so on, but it is obvious in the close collaboration that you have that sometimes there have to be crashes and clashes. I was just wondering what do your neighbours say about this?

Loud laughter

MH: So they have a different version?

AKR: You know what, we had to tell our closest neighbour Doris Funcke, who is an artist as well, she understands, that we are not killing each other. We just like to scream at each other as a way of communicating. We are very loud, but it's always about things like how to put up the shelves.

AVH: It is really funny. If we have to pack up the car, we have to decide who is the project leader and then that person decides.

AKR: Yes, like these moments of letting the other person decide, like when you describe something in common, and I shut up even if I do not agree with what you are saying ...

AVH: But conflict is a good thing.

AKR: Yes, here we have two very strong-minded persons who often have a clear idea about how things should be done.

AVH: But when we get into the fieldwork, it's the situation, it's the project that's number one and up and running. It is the project and whatever is best for the project that matters. The point is to think what both of us can do to deliver the most to the project for it to be as good as possible.

AKR: We are a very small team, it's very important that when we are out working that we are focused, like when I am talking to people, and at the same time holding up the reflection board and Anna is filming. It is a very obvious set-up. We have a similar eye and mind for the issues, and we have no time to bullshit. We just have to get done what needs to get done. You know, last summer we did 35 filmed interviews and 11 large-format portraits in 19 days. With this project we have been working in the reverse way to what I learned about working in a documentary tradition, by first learning about the site and the person, getting them to open up, and so on. Instead of this, we have been hooking up with the directness and the energy that come from straightforward

questions. The interesting point is that the people we feel that we failed with in this project are the ones we had the long discussions with. They were too relaxed, laid back and they did not actually say so much.

MH: In what sense did you fail?

AKR: They did not have the same energy in that specific moment.

AVH: Here we need to emphasize our decision to proceed with the work into a seven-screen project. If anyone is going to stop and listen to the stories, it will be dependent on the energy delivered through that screen. Working as a small team with quite light equipment that was easy to move around, we gained directness, energy and spontaneity, sometimes at the cost of higher technical quality. When we came back to St. Petersburg in the summer of 2007, we knew what we were after, and with some people we did not get more than 20 minutes to film, but because of the directness and the focus, that was plenty for what we wanted. The people involved, then knew about our background with the project. They knew about our investment and interest, because there had always been someone within the project informing them about it beforehand. It kind of fed back into it. The project became the research.