

In the bath-house

Photography and words.

First published in *Jezga* magazine issue 2 – a publication focusing on post-Soviet youth culture – in January 2019.

Russian version of the essay was published in *Открытые* (o-zine.ru) – a pioneering LGBTQ+ publication based in Moscow – in January 2020.

Expanded into the series of fine art prints in June 2020 for the occasion of *Queer Frontiers* group show by Artiq and Pride in London.

In the bath-house, the mysteries hidden
by trousers
Are revealed to you.

All becomes radiantly manifest.
Feast your eyes without restraint!

You see handsome buttocks, shapely trimtorsos,

You hear the guys whispering pious formulas
to one another
("God is Great!" "Praise be to God!")

Ah, what a palace of pleasure is the bathhouse!

Even when the towel-bearers come in.
And spoil the fun a bit.

– Abū Nuwās (c. 756 – c. 814 AD)
Translated by Geoff Puterbaugh

AN ESSAY ON SELF-CONFIDENCE & HOMOEROTIC ARABIC POETRY

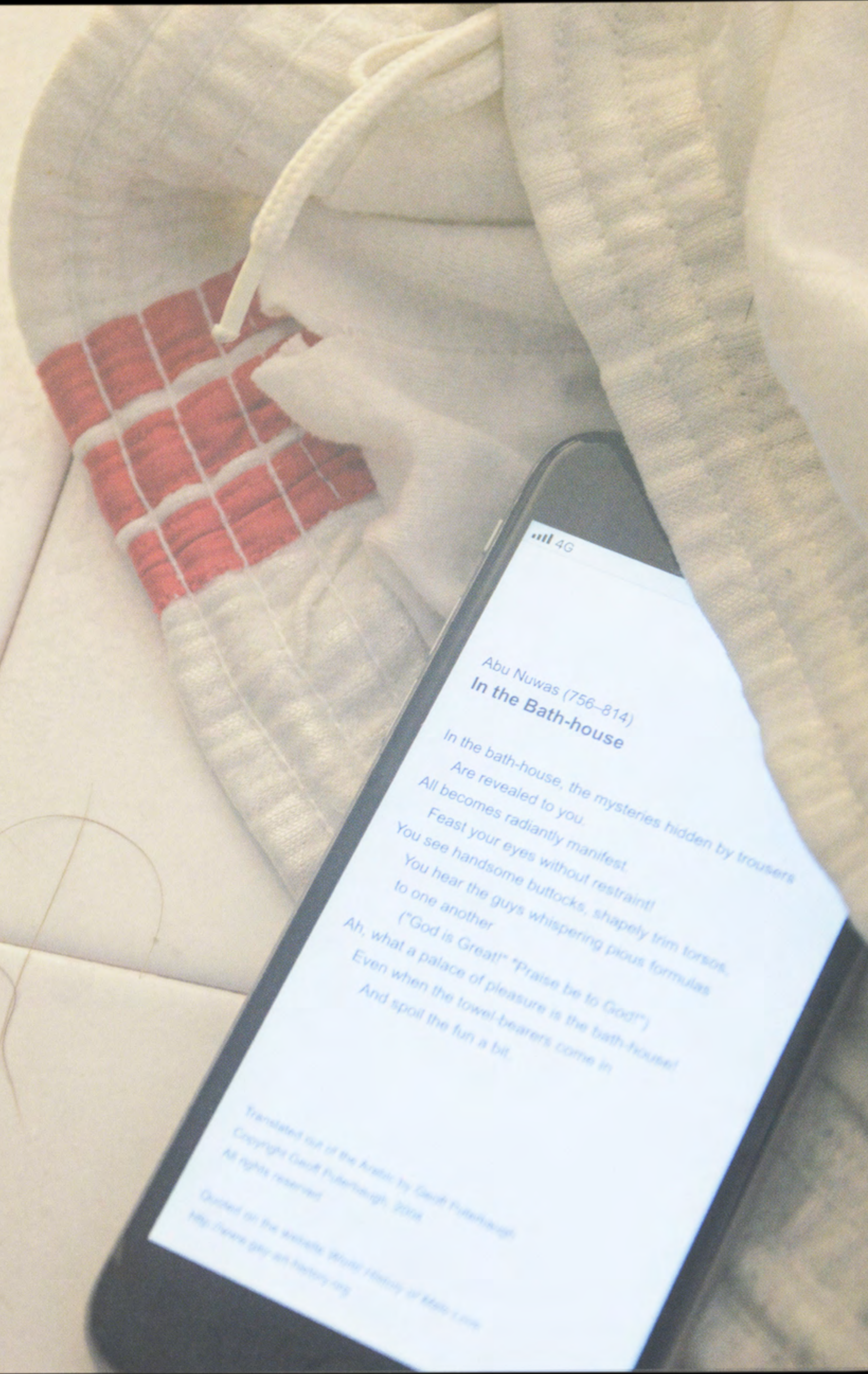
photography and text KONSTANTIN ZHUKOV

I was one of those kids who preferred Barbie dolls to toy cars, who used to know the release date of every Madonna album, and who wanted to become a fashion designer, obviously. Were these the first signs of a gay kid? Not sure, but when we got the Internet, just like a proper millennial, I quickly found my way to porn sites, where my favourite section was 'Gay'. "That's the last time", I told myself, "I must be straight" I thought, and I promised myself to find a girlfriend. Because that's who boys should be attracted to. My first sexual encounters proved me wrong.

With time, although still conflicted, I gave up on the idea of a girlfriend, but it was a "don't ask, don't tell" kind of situation. Not a unique one for Riga, at least some time ago. Amsterdam, the capital of gay marriage and weed, seemed like a different kind of deal – a hard-to-believe place in my mind. I had this dream to travel to Amsterdam with a secret lover of mine, and have a long kiss straight after the arrival, right in the airport, right in public. Unreal. But I moved to London instead.

London was for education, for different perspectives, ideas and sources. I was a student now. London was a much more open and freeing space, but my self-confidence had yet to catch up. My personal work, the photos I was taking in response to the books I was reading, became an important tool for self-exploration. Part of the "therapy" of accepting my own homosexuality was to prove to myself that it is normal, and that it always has been around. Thus, discovering historical accounts and the texts – from Ancient Greece and Rome, poetic letters of medieval monks, the accounts of Victorian era and the story of Oscar Wilde – was a mind-opening exercise. How intricate and varied are our relationships and sexualities, how interlinked they are with the politics of a society of the time.

BATH HOUSE



Abu Nuwas (756-814)
In the Bath-house

In the bath-house, the mysteries hidden by trousers
Are revealed to you.
All becomes radiantly manifest.
Feast your eyes without restraint!
You see handsome buttocks, shapely trim torsos.
You hear the guys whispering pious formulas
to one another
("God is Great!" "Praise be to God!")
Ah, what a palace of pleasure is the bath-house!
Even when the towel-bearers come in
And spoil the fun a bit.

Translated out of the Arabic by Geoff Futerbaugh
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Quoted on the website: World History of Man's Love
<http://www.geoff-futerbaugh.com>



In the bath-house #5 2019
Jezga magazine Vol. 2



In the bath-house #6 2019
In the bath-house #7 2019
Jezga magazine Vol. 2



ПОДПИСИТЕСЬ - ФБ ИНСТ ТГ

Black Carnation Part Three

Black Carnation is an ongoing project exploring and responding to the scarcely documented and preserved queer histories of Latvia.

The project's title is a reference to the name for homosexual men used in Latvia before World War II, and to a widely reported criminal case of that time where several men were prosecuted for their homosexuality.

Anonymous bodies and mute interactions are captured by Zhukov at a cruising beach a short train ride away from Riga. The irreversibly disappearing images – owing to the process of thermal printing onto the same receipt paper used for train tickets – speak to the state of Latvia’s queer archives and to the nature of memory itself; a transience, a softness, a fuzzy edgedness.
– Helen Neven

Black Carnation Part Three #30 2/2
2023

Giclée print on Canson Rag
Photographique

Black Carnation Part Three #30 1/2
2023

Thermal print on receipt paper,
giclée printed background

13.8 x 26.8 x 2.1 cm each





Black Carnation Part Three #15
2024

Black Carnation Part Three #26
2024

Thermal prints on receipt paper,
sticker, giclée printed backgrounds
18.5x13.4x2.1 cm each

MO Museum, Vilnius, Lithuania
installation view





Black Carnation Part Three #22-24
2024

Thermal prints on receipt paper,
giclée printed backgrounds
18.5x13.4x2.1 cm each



NEVEN Gallery, London, UK
installation view
Photo: Dominique Cro

The installation at NEVEN gallery in London explored the banality of solitude which was characteristic of the queer life stories for most of the 20th century. In a nod to the Soviet interior, the gallery walls were painted halfway, recalling the decor of institutions and communal apartments at the time. Zhukov reflects on the ambiguity between private and public in these shared spaces, which historically rendered queer intimacy near impossible.



NEVEN Gallery, London, UK
installation view
Photo: Dominique Cro

This tension between presence and absence, as well as indexes of touch, are through lines in Zhukov's works: sitters appear and disappear from view; a bowl, once containing apples, sits empty; white socks are left discarded on the floor.



Black Carnation Part Three #4-6
2024

Thermal print on receipt paper,
giclée printed background
13.3x18.5x2.1 cm each

The mangled, skeletal frame of a raskladushka – a folding bed prevalent in Soviet and post-Soviet homes – further speaks to the transience of bodies in space and the tension between public and private. The come-and-go of inhabitants and guests.

NEVEN Gallery, London, UK
installation view

(57.0999014, 24.1573329)
2024

Aluminium foldable bed frame,
nylon fishing net

Variable dimensions

Photo: Dominique Cro







Latvian National Museum of Art,
Riga, Latvia, installation view

The “real evidence” collected by the artist and the images of cruising sites made in the style of forensic photography highlight the element of transgression in the often anonymous male encounters and critically illuminate the hierarchies of power that determine the distribution of the spaces of intimacy.
- Igor Gubenko



Latvian National Museum of Art,
Riga, Latvia, installation view



Latvian Centre for Contemporary
Art, Riga, installation view



Black Carnation: Case Study No. 2

Black Carnation: Case Study No. 2 explores oral histories of the first semi-legal gay parties in the early 1990s, organised straight after the independence from the Soviet Union and subsequent decriminalisation of homosexuality. These emancipative experiences represent an aspect of broader liberation and freedom in the Baltic context, often unmentioned and yet vital.
– Jussi Koitela, curator

Latvian Centre for Contemporary
Art, *Survival Kit 15*, installation view
Black Carnation: Case Study No. 2
2024

Video, sound, newsprint, LED strip
light, plastic chairs and crates

Video duration: 7 min



At the core of the work are the artist's conversations with the witnesses of Riga's first semi-legal gay parties in the early 1990-s. A common thread emerges – touch – desire for, inability to, political potential and the ecstasy of.

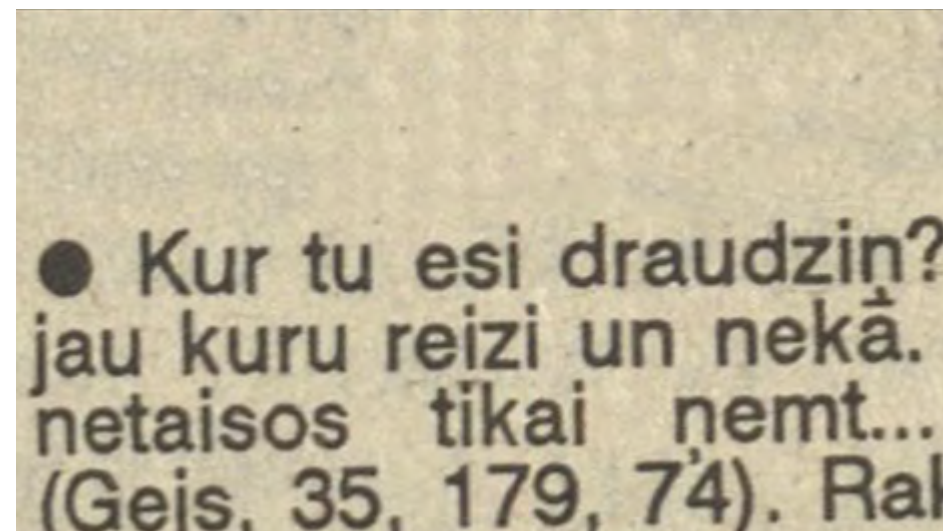
Voiced by people organising queer nightlife in Riga today and set to thumping electronic beats with a rapid-fire montage of black-and-white images the video evokes a spirit of time – sudden democratisation and drastic capitalisation of the region permeated with a sense of freedom, excitement and lawless danger.

Kā tas ir – pieskarties otram cilvēkam?

What is it like – to touch another person?

Black Carnation: Case Study No. 2
2024

Video stills
Video duration: 7 min





Latvian Centre for Contemporary
Art, *Survival Kit 15*, installation view

Black Carnation: Case Study No. 1

Black Carnation: Case Study No. 1 focuses on the Latvian National Opera as a building, urban environment and a community. Using homoerotic reading of Tchaikovsky's ballet *Swan Lake* as a metaphor, Zhukov talks about the hidden and (self)censored stories permeating the space. The language of this fragmented history consists of coded gestures and messages, whispers and hints.
– Liāna Ivete Žilde, curator

Riga Photography Biennial,
ISSP Gallery, installation view

Black Carnation: Case Study No. 1
2024

Newsprint, looped two-channel
video, laser print on paper

Photo: Ingus Bajārs



At the core of the work is an essay written by the artist and printed in three most commonly spoken languages in Latvia – Latvian, Russian and English. You can read the essay [here](#).



Black Carnation: Case Study No. 1
2024
Laser print on paper, A4
Photo: Sasha Komarova

The fragments of queer people's portraits, whose lives were linked to the Latvian National Opera, are visible through the tears in newsprint covering the walls. An eye, a still gesture or a fragment of someone's smile drowned in the dark waters of the city canal.



Black Carnation: Case Study No. 1
2024

Video, sound
Duration: 10:12 min

Photo: Sasha Komarova

Black Carnation Part Two

With contributions by the historian Ineta Lipša and the poet Kārlis Vērdiņš, *Black Carnation Part Two* introduced the issues that defined the lives of LGBTQ+ people for the most of 20th century – medicine, law, modes of communication and survival mechanisms.

'Love' Forbidden by Law – scans of a chapter from the popular Soviet-time book on sexual health *In the Name of Love* (1981) by Jānis Zālītis covered the gallery windows. The author, an influential physician of the time, saw heteronormativity and heterosexuality as key to happiness and suggested to treat such 'sexual deviation' as homosexuality with hypnotherapy.



In the Name of Love 2022
Site-specific installation

7 panels measuring 237 x 176 cm
each, made up of A3 laser
printed pages

Black Carnation is a subculture that carries a historical record of the survival instinct within its DNA – to be invisible, unnoticeable. The laws and codes of this subculture were passed by word of mouth, but history fades with people. Often hidden and thus undocumented, this subculture communicated in whispers, just like reeds on a nudist beach.

Black Carnation #1 2022
Giclée print on Formei Velvet

Black Carnation #2 2022
Giclée print on Formei Velvet

Photo: Ingus Bajārs



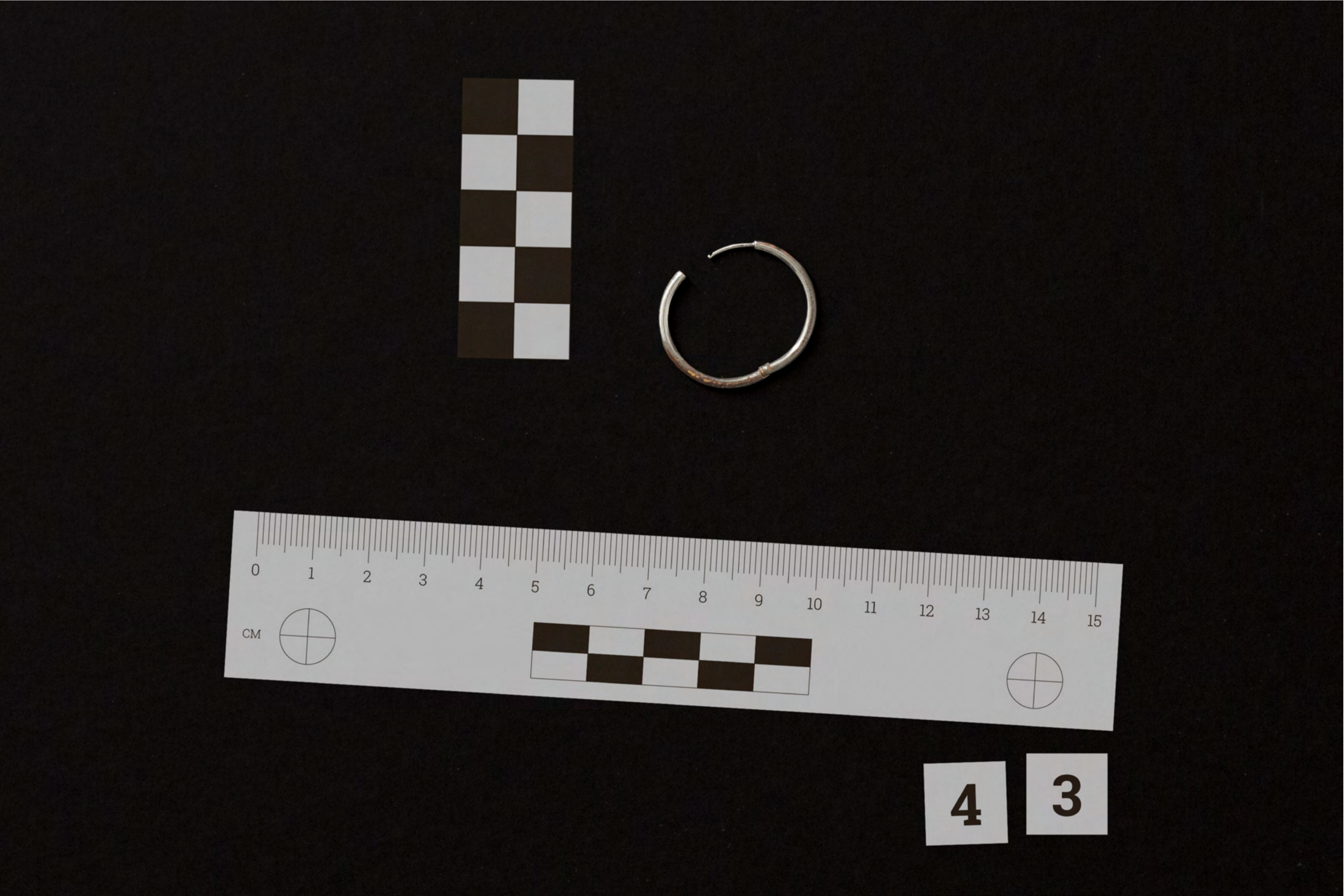


Installation view
ISSP Gallery, Riga
Photo: Ingus Bajārs

The objects collected at the cruising
beaches outside of Riga were
photographed in the style of forensic
photography - a memento of the
criminalisation of homosexuality in
Latvia until 1992.

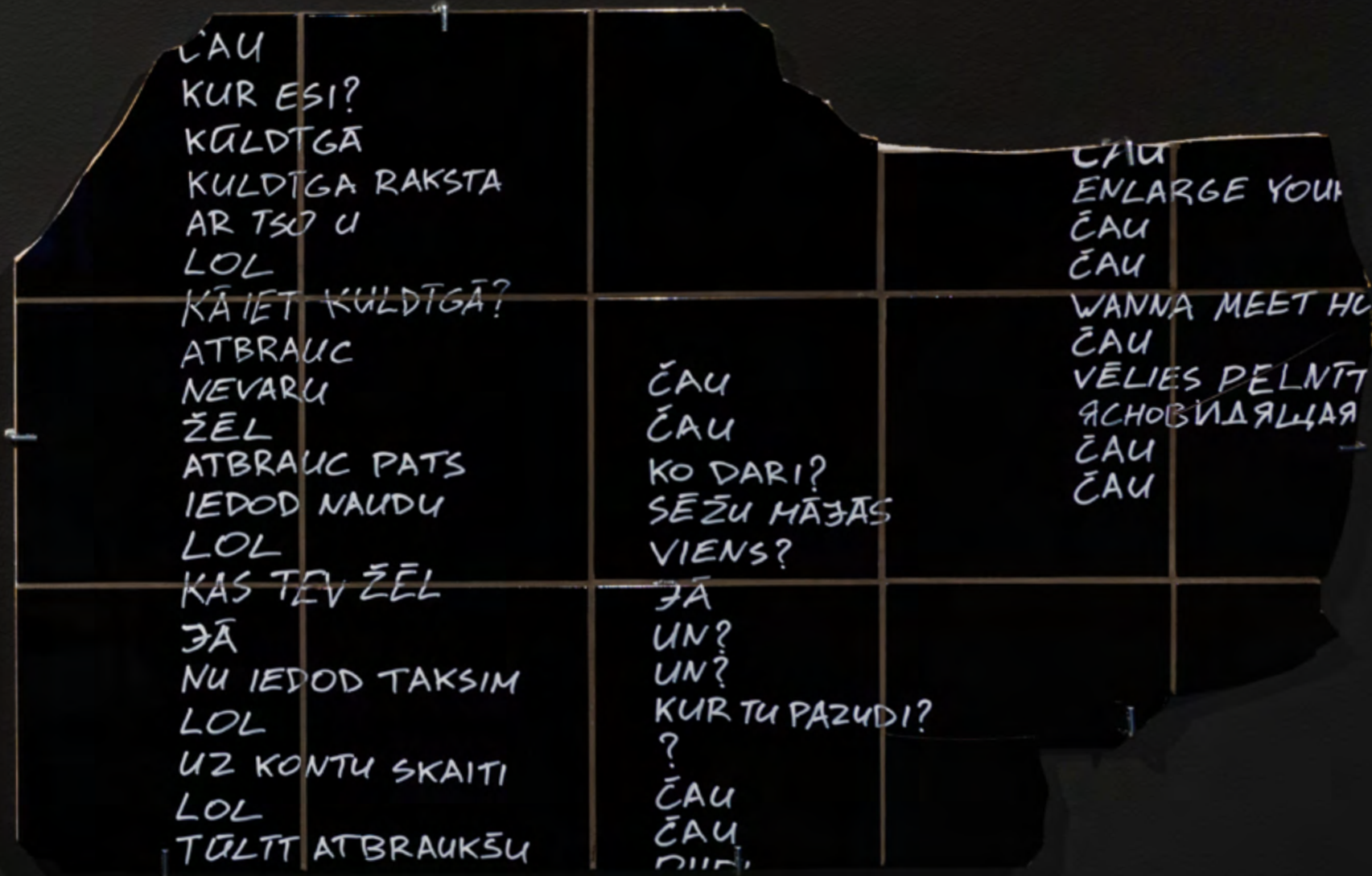


*Black Carnation: evidence
photography #10 2022*
Giclée print on Formei Velvet



*Black Carnation: evidence
photography #43 2022*
Giclée print on Formei Velvet

Anonymous messages covering some of the public bathrooms – an urban space for meeting like-minded partners – were the form of indirect communication, a testament to one’s existence. A poem Čau by Kārlis Vērdinš, inspired by the language of contemporary gay dating apps, covers the tiled reliefs.



Vērdinš Marbles #1 2022

Vērdinš Marbles #2 2022

Ceramic tiles, plasterboard, white permanent marker pen, L-hooks



Vērdiņš Marbles #1 (detail) 2022

Ceramic tiles, plasterboard, white
permanent marker pen, L-hooks

Black Carnation

The Latvian press began using the term Black Carnation for the male homosexual community in the 1920s. The metaphor may have been invented by this community themselves. This is evidenced by a mark of identification described by a journalist of the time – a black carnation on a green enameled locket, that had to be presented in order to enter a club. After this publication, homosexuals began to be called members of the Black Carnation Club in interwar Latvian public discourse, and later – simply black carnations. They formed a specific subculture, the traditions of which were influenced by the legal framework.

Law

30 years ago, on 1 March 1992, amendments to the Criminal Code came into force, decriminalizing sexual intercourse between men in Latvia. Until then – at least from the 18th century – it was threatened with criminal punishment. In the Republic of Latvia, until 1 August 1933, convicted men were imprisoned for a period of not less than three months, and after that, the duration of imprisonment was not specified by law. Judges were guided by previous practice and sentences mostly specified several weeks’ imprisonment. The situation was drastically changed by the Soviet occupation in 1940, which imposed new legal terms on the people of Soviet Latvia, stipulating imprisonment for a term of three to five years (§ 154a). This was mitigated by the Soviet Latvian Criminal Code of 1961, which set only the maximum limit of imprisonment – up to five years (§ 124.1). The government criminalized only same-sex anal sex acts, while stigmatizing homosexuality as such, whether among men or women.

Medicine

In the 1960s and 70s, while the West was experiencing a sexual revolution, the Soviet Union saw changes both in the sexual behaviour of the population and the sciences that explained it. In 1965, Soviet psychiatrists established a new branch, sexual pathology. It promoted a new, ‘scientific’ perception of homosexuality, which differed from the hitherto simplistic notion adopted by police of homosexuality as criminal psychopathy. Soviet sexual pathologists presented homosexuals as individuals who are aware of their different sexuality and are looking for ways to treat it, describing homosexuality as a treatable disease. Their views differed significantly from those of homosexuality as a normal variant of human sexuality, which led to the American Psychiatric Association’s 1973 decision to exclude homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders. These new ideas also influenced the efforts of Soviet lawyers. They repeatedly discussed the proposal to repeal the article criminalizing consensual sex among males, but the general public was unaware of this.

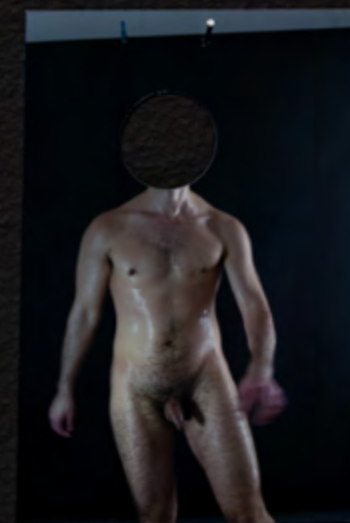
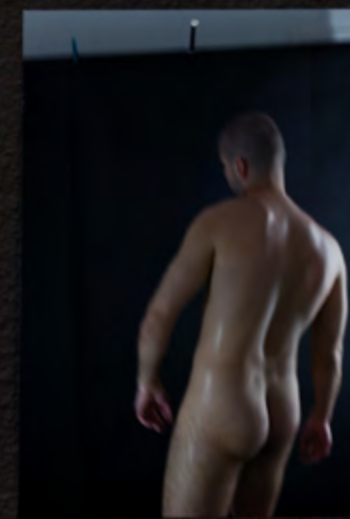
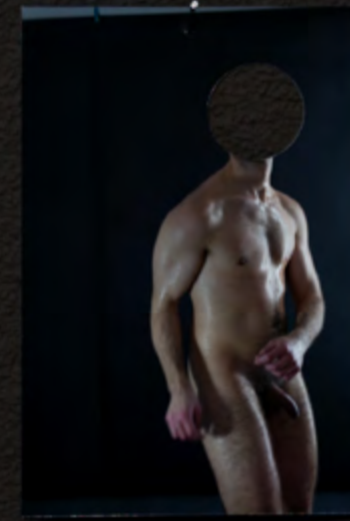
Meeting places

The long-standing legal framework contributed to the emergence of a specific ethos of secrecy in the male homosexual subculture. Both before and after World War II, this subculture was characterized by a group-specific irony, vocabulary, solidarity, and self-censorship. One of the hidden traditions was walking around known socializing locations in the public space of Riga in search of possible sexual partners. Historical sources are silent about the term used by homosexuals in Latvia. Some described it as a flirting process. Nowadays, the term ‘cruising’ has entered common use, adopted from English. In the summer, homosexuals also frequented several beaches near Riga. The most popular were in Bulļi and Kalngale.



Black Carnation #3 2022
Giclée print on Formei Velvet
Installation view photo: Ingus Bajārs

Black Carnation #4-7 2022
Giclée print on Formei Velvet





Black Carnation: real evidence #1
2022

Burnt log, tiled platform

Black Carnation Part One

The first installment of the *Black Carnation* project. The project's title is a reference to the name for homosexual men used in Latvia before World War II, and to a widely reported criminal case of that time where several men were accused of pederasty (homosexuality). It revolved around a house - a meeting place for men seeking other men - that stood in Riga's Old Town, where in winter 2021, some 100 years later, Zhukov opened Grindr, one of the most popular dating platforms for the 'black carnations' today...



Black Carnation Part One 2021
Installation view, Pilot art space, Riga
Photo: Madara Gritāne

‘In fall 1926 the Riga criminal police learned that regular meetings between men are held at Emīls Kozlovskis’ flat on 14 M. Ķēniņa [street], with the participation of young soldiers of the local garrison, and that during these meetings various unnatural acts of intercourse are taking place <...> After learning of this, criminal police sub-inspector Liepiņš, on November 3 of the same year, arrived at the flat of Kozlovskis without prior notice and carried out a search.’

This is an excerpt of the police report that started off the so-called *Black Carnation Club* case, which was the first and only criminal case in inter-war Latvia where several men were accused of *pederasty* (male homosexuality).¹

Almost 100 years later, standing on the Līvu Square, where Kozlovskis’ flat was formerly located, I opened the Grindr app, one of the most popular dating platforms for gay, bisexual and queer people. The ‘Black Carnation Club’ has been replaced by a virtual space, whereas dress codes and passwords have given way to emojis and English-language abbreviations. To people whose sexuality lies outside the boundaries of heteronormativity, dating apps are often the only way to meet other people in relative safety, for one night or until death does them part.

The layout of the app is a grid made up of the users’ profile pictures – faces, cropped body parts, or black squares of anonymous profiles. What are these squares hiding? I decided to invite people using the app to a video call. Similarly to the way in which the app asks users to fill in a form with information about themselves – their height, weight, body type, preferred sexual position... I, too, posed them short questions in the form of a questionnaire. But I was interested in something else – what is their notion of happiness, what their fears are...

Men who are using or formerly used Grindr took part in the work. Some of them stopped using the app as they are in a monogamous relationship, while others have done so due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Heartfelt thanks to those who expressed interest and decided to take part in making the work.

¹ Lipša I. (2006) ‘Melnās neļķes ziedināšana. Homoseksuālisms starpkaru Latvijā’, Rīgas Laiks, Augusts



Black Carnation Part One 2021
Portrait panel 15

Name, age	Daniel, 31 + Bumbieris, 26
Occupation	PR specialist + bartender.
Your idea of happiness?	B: Doing something you feel like doing, something that makes you happy basically. D: My idea of happiness is to somehow accept who I am, and what I am doing – and not worry.
The quality you like in yourself?	D: I think it's my good skills in reaching people – conversing with people – even if they are alien or foreign to me. I am pretty open and people feel comfortable with that. B: Being truthful to myself. It doesn't matter what your rank in society is, just think of yourself as not being put in some kind of box.
The quality you dislike in yourself?	D: I sometimes lack determination, because I want everything but I can only do one thing. I'm not capable of doing everything. B: I was going to reply something similar, but not really; I can be pretty obsessive about things for one day, two days, three days, then I change to something completely different. I'll be listening to an astrology podcast, then I'm learning Danish, and next I'm into some kind of herbal stuff with alcohol.
Talent you would like to have?	D: Being able to fly. B: When I was a kid I dreamt of being a wizard. Other boys wanted to be policemen, firemen... It's also some kind of karma thing, like if you do bad, you get bad. For example, if people bully someone... It might be because of my personal experience...
Your greatest fear?	D: I think my greatest fear is not to feel one hundred per cent content with who I am and what I am doing; where I am living, my work, my hobbies, my body... not to be content with life. B: I went through some fears in my head, starting from spiders, insects and clowns. Then I moved to the fear of death, which



Black Carnation Part One 2021
Installation view, Pilot art space, Riga
Photo: Madara Gritāne



Black Carnation Part One 2021
Installation view, Pilot art space, Riga
Photo: Madara Gritāne

Questionnaire

Series of publications self-published for the occasion of Paris Ass Book Fair at Palais de Tokyo, Paris, March 2018.

15x21cm each, French-bound,
Edition of 50

I invite different people to a white studio. I ask them to stand still in front of my camera and remove one piece of clothing or jewellery at a time until naked. I press the shutter button after each piece of clothing is removed. I ask them the Proust Questionnaire.

Questionnaire

J'invite des personnes dans un studio blanc. Je leur demande de rester immobile devant mon appareil photo et d'enlever leurs vêtements et leurs bijoux un par un jusqu'à ce qu'ils soient nus. J'appuie sur le déclencheur après chaque vêtement enlevé. Je les soumetts au Questionnaire de Proust.

Ton idée du bonheur ?
Comment aimerais-tu mourir ?

Questionnaire

I invite different people to a white studio. I ask them to stand still in front of my camera and remove one piece of clothing or jewellery at a time until naked. I press the shutter button after each piece of clothing is removed. I ask them the Proust Questionnaire.

Your idea of happiness?
How would you like to die?

NB

Je vous invite d'acheter plusieurs publications mais vous ne pouvez pas choisir le modèle. Votre choix sera caché dans une enveloppe noire.

You are welcome to buy as many publications as you wish, but you can't choose the sitter. You'll get your random choice hidden in a black envelope.

Prix/Price: € 10

SJ 15-10-1991



ASH 03-11-1992



JL 06-05-1993



18. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

I wish I was an easy going person who likes to socialise.

19. What do you consider your greatest achievement?

my ability to always do what I want to do.

20. If you were to die and come back as a person or a thing, what would it be?

I would come back as Beyoncé, I am desperate to know what this kind of power feels like.

21. Where would you most like to live?

In a hybrid of a big city and the countryside.

22. What is your most treasured possession?

My gold jewellery & my grandmother's ring.

23. What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?

when depression takes you into the abyss & you can feel your toes touching it.

24. What is your favorite occupation?

Anyone who does things that give me goosebumps.

25. What is your most marked characteristic?

Angry, up & down, hopelessly loving and stubborn as hell.

26. What do you most value in your friends?

loyalty

9. On what occasion do you lie?

all of the time, to make people happy

10. What do you most dislike about your appearance?

I wouldn't mind my facial hair if my skin didn't scar so easily

11. Which living person do you most despise?

Jeremy Hunt probably, or Rex Tillerson fuck that guy

12. What is the quality you most like in a man?

access to femininity

13. What is the quality you most like in a woman?

humour and giving zero fucks

14. Which words or phrases do you most overuse?

"don't worry I'm just chatting shit"
"Yes, I can do that"

15. What or who is the greatest love of your life?

No doubt my mother, the moon

16. When and where were you happiest?

My best friend was leaving the city for a while so we managed to catch each other at this dingy dive bar and hit the floor, sober, ecstatic, danced til 6am

17. Which talent would you most like to have?

I wish I could play double bass,
I would settle for (single) bass

18. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?

lack of discipline

19. What do you consider your greatest achievement?

I survived for a year working 70 hours a week, no disposable income, eating frozen peas, spent about \$4000 max, managing other people's emotions, kept most of my

20. If you were to die and come back as a person or a thing, what would it be?

a giant sequoia tree !!

21. Where would you most like to live?

In a magical land where my family could all be nearby without visa or work issues

22. What is your most treasured possession?

The diary I've had since I was eleven & a hard drive with all my work on it

23. What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?

absolutism, fundamentalism, taking yourself too seriously

24. What is your favorite occupation?

fun: cooking with an abundance of ingredients
work: my job is the best in the world, making films

25. What is your most marked characteristic?

I speak and think at the same pace, both very fast, both a bit messy

26. What do you most value in your friends?

openness towards new experiences and thoughts
loyalty and no drama

mental health! I think

can't back this up





