

“IF THE EXHIBITION WERE
A FACTORY, IT WOULD BE
PRODUCING GLUE”



ROBERTAS NARKUS IN CONVERSATION
WITH ELVIA WILK

Robertas Narkus's new solo show at Vilnius's Contemporary Art Center, *Träger*, is populated by characters invisible to the naked eye. They can only be seen with the help of a smartphone or tablet that augments reality, revealing scanned figures performing various activities around the room.

The experience of discovering the hidden actors and relationships in the space is like getting to know Narkus's work in general. Besides co-running a series of "hypothetical" startup companies and an experimental engineering camp, the Lithuanian artist and his collaborators recently opened a project space in Vilnius called Autarkia—*autarky* meaning self-sufficiency. Autarkia hosts constant performances, workshops, screenings, and parties, but also maintains a restaurant with an unusually diverse clientele (including that of this year's Venice Biennale, where it popped up).

In all instances, Narkus' playful experimentation yields complex socio-political engagement. As he puts it, he's working with an "economy of coincidences," not always producing material artworks, but rather the relations behind them—"the glue."



ROBERTAS NARKUS

I've been thinking about Skype devotion lately. We were just chatting on Facebook—we could have had a video chat there too.

ELVIA WILK

You're right. I don't know why I'm so devoted to Skype. It's like shorthand for "this is a professional interview"—You can't say "I'm having a Facebook meeting," can you?

RN

No, that would be tacky. The Skype branding goes really deep.

EW

It seems like you think about branding a lot. It's really evident in your *Trager* show at the CAC. For one thing, you have these little heads everywhere in the promotional materials and on the website that serve as the kind of brand iconography of the exhibition. And in the exhibition itself there's an Apple-store-like kiosk, where people go to pick up the iPads that they need in order to see the augmented reality elements around the room.

RN

Right, there's this central booth, a control point. At the opening, it was kind of like going to a preview by Apple or Google for a new app in the app store. And actually, a few of my semi-real tech companies were behind developing the exhibition, so it was a launch of a sort. One company, *Doghme*, was set up for a previous show (at *Neverneverland*) in Amsterdam, which was like a prequel to *Trager*.

EW

Doghme was the name of the show, but also the name of the company you set up?

RN

Yes, it's a hypothetical company owned by me, Kipras (Garlas), and Antanas (Skučas). The whole show was about these two guys, Kipras and me, trying to divide the company shares and having a conflict about who was more important in the process. I was thinking about advertising strategies—with technology, you always need a face to connect with, like this face you mention from *Trager*.

EW

In looking through your past work, I've noticed how many of the actual processes are under the surface and sort of periodically crystallize into shows. You're always involved in ongoing collaboration and research, forming different companies... some of them coalesce into exhibitions, but they're just continually happening anyway.

RN

I've never thought of myself as someone who could continue doing something for more than a few weeks. But now I see that some things actually last for a long time. So I am way more relaxed about my artistic career—I just do things. I don't see each as a separate project.

EW

So there are a few of these companies or projects going on and one of them is *Doghme*. Then there's also *Visionary*, right?

RN

The *Visionary* program is a way to manifest the complicated Institute of 'Pataphysics, which I happened to get involved in in 2013, upon a visit to the Collège de 'Pataphysique in Paris. 'Pataphysics has a heavy and rich tradition with very particular connotations. It's a hundred years old. By launching *Visionary* we were trying to reapproach the basic concept: the science of imagined solutions.

Visionary is a kind of bad idea, both from the perspective that 'Pataphysics is supposed to be something useless, and also because the project has the pretension of a scientific approach to creativity. The program places artists within science and business enterprises, based on the ideas of the Artist Placement Group. Our first mission was to place ourselves within a company that develops virtual reality solutions. Then this evolved into *Doghme*, and then the other branch, Autarkia.

EW

Autarkia, your project space in Vilnius, is another company branch?

RN

By now it's totally separate, but originally it was rooted in the *Visionary* program—it started as a project to work with genetic engineers to make plants that could glow. Autarkia was a code name for this genetic engineering project. We made a hydroponic system that

was supposed to maintain the glowing plants. The launch of Autarkia [the space] was the presentation of that system. In the end, the system was totally non-functional. The plants that grew were really weird and glowed for only a short moment.

EW It's funny that the literal manifestation of this art-and-tech collaboration was a dysfunctional hydroponic system.



RN It's not like I sincerely believe in the successful merging of art and science. We made plants glow: great. I'm more interested in the price that artists pay for using certain technology.

EW What do you mean by that?

RN Bioluminescence is already used in laboratories; you make certain bacteria carry certain glowing elements. We were injecting these plants, kind of tattooing them, so they would glow in particular patterns. Scientists are doing these injections on a daily basis, but they hadn't imagined using it to make plants glow.

The project was about exposing these simple "life hacks" artists try to hide, as if we're doing something very serious. I'm interested in giving opportunities to these scientists or engineers to do what is not necessary for them in their daily practices.

EW That also describes how the augmented reality works in the *Träger* show—It's not a typical application of the technology as used by programmers, and it creates strange coincidences.

RN Yes, exactly. We scanned the group of ten people, including me, who contributed to making the show, and they are recreated (in augmented reality). These instances or copies of ourselves become the guides to the show. And then a whole drama starts to evolve between the characters and their relations. Some people appear twice, some appear in a group, some are standing alone. I'm in the center carrying two paint buckets. The situations are very basic and simple. That doesn't mean anything can be taken out of context, but depending on how you go through the space of this exhibition, certain dramaturgical lines appear.

EW They're all doing things like lifting, climbing, bending, driving—like they're constructing something in virtual space that isn't there yet. In real space, there are construction materials in a corner and self-driving machines moving through the room. The narrative that I built is that the characters are shifting through this detritus in a construction yard in Vilnius and gathering stuff to build an artist space like Autarkia.





RN The show is very classical in the sense that it represents a group of people trying to build something that would bring us to a new, better, future. Well, not really *future*. Something different. I'm looking at how things are being produced. I think about what's being made as a kind of glue... If the show were a factory I think it would be producing glue.



EW Right, you're making the material to stick things together. The meta-material for building things. There are lots of ways to talk about the exhibition in terms of meta-layers: augmented reality on real space; audience interaction through the technology; and then the autonomous machines somehow bringing this meta-layer of absent mechanics. There are these forklift-like machines driving themselves around the space. They are also where you got the name of the show, right? *Träger*, meaning forklift in German?

RN In German it has a broader meaning. *Träger* can also be something that carries certain knowledge; it can carry a secret. *Träger* is also the word used for blood cells. Even more broadly, just using the German word references Germany as the economic driver of Europe. Also, I like that it has two dots.

EW My favorite part of the exhibition are these huge walls covered with blown-up images of dog food, which you told me you chose because it's an easy pattern for the augmented reality app to recognize. But there are lots of patterns you could have picked—really, why dog food?

RN It's associated with efficiency, concentrated matter. It's very efficient and also very disgusting for humans.

EW A cross between the industrial and the domestic, maybe. It goes really well with the ruins in the corner and these ramshackle architectures that come out of the wall. But I have no idea why it works.

RN For me, too, there are always parts I don't understand or I'm not able to explain. That's where interesting things happen. That's what, in a way, every artist is interested in: how to use the things that you can control in order to achieve something you cannot control.

EW The dog food also connects to your other projects involving food. Like at your show at Tenderpixel in London (in 2014) you had some squid ink involved—Was it edible?

RN The squid ink wasn't edible in that case. The show was a combination of two installations: On the ground floor there was squid ink boiling in a dish, evaporating

in the space. And downstairs there was a performance, a belly dancer wearing a black outfit with the belly cut out. Her belly looked like a hologram. It was like analogue virtual reality. You couldn't tell what it was—you'd go close to it, thinking it was a hologram, and then find someone real.



EW So your work is full of gestures to eating and digestion. But now at Autarkia, you're actually running a restaurant, Delta Mityba. It's unusual to have a super functional artist space that is also so functional as a restaurant, where all kinds of non-art people also come to eat. Every time I was at Delta for lunch, it was a clear mix of social groups. Most people were there to eat the amazing and affordable food and go back to work. But you also had co-working art people sitting there all day at their laptops...

RN It's a very particular, site-specific situation in Vilnius, both with the audience we have and our ways of attracting people. In this moment, it's about efficiency. We want to see if it's possible to survive without outside funding. We want to prove it to ourselves. We also want to subvert the idea of the artist-run space. What is gallery? What is restaurant? We don't know what we *are*, but that doesn't mean we don't know what we're *doing* here. It's easiest to invite people to the restaurant and for them to slowly get used to the place. Now we're shifting the program, and we'll start next month having shows.

EW Like static art exhibitions?

RN Like static art exhibitions. And that's a new thing. I don't know how it will go. We already have an audience that is curious and comes regularly. Technically, we're not even open yet—we just opened immediately and had events while we were in construction. Nothing ever stopped. And I would say the same with the show at CAC. There was no real opening, because during the whole construction of the show was, in a way, open. People could come, and a lot of people did, because many were involved.

This transparency is important for local processes. In a way, coming back to Vilnius lets me do something important here in this smaller context, as opposed to operating in Amsterdam, where you're way more engaged with pursuing your own persona and career. Even though you have friends there, it's a community of people operating on their own. Here you're directly working with far broader audiences. It feels like making more of an impact.

EW What made you want to come back after studying and living in Amsterdam?

RN I can't complain about Amsterdam at all. I think I managed to do quite well there. But there were a few coincidences that brought me back to Vilnius. One was of course this show at the CAC; I knew it wouldn't happen if I was working from Amsterdam. Now with Autarkia I'm thinking, "am I stuck in Vilnius?" But I'm not afraid of problems, rather I'm afraid when there are no problems. Then things are boring.

EW Autarkia is explained on its website as an "artist daycare center," which sounds about right to me. Why do you think artists need daycare?

RN It's a space not only for exhibiting but also for spending time, producing social space. Some people would say, "ah, so many parties at Autarkia"—well, that's a conscious decision. We have these different circles of people who don't usually come together.

EW To me it's about making a place beyond the institution or the gallery or the studio, which can all be isolating environments. Does Autarkia have a built-in lifespan?

RN I've given myself a span of one year for Autarkia and Delta. I would like them not to be only associated with myself and my personality, so it's important for me to create a structure that can function further on. The lease is for ten years. There was a need for a space to happen here, and it's way easier to do something if it's actually necessary. And it feels important to bring back some experience to share it. At this moment in the world, Vilnius is a very good place to live, to operate, and to produce. It can be a perfect base for many things.



Robertas Narkus (1983, Vilnius) describes his practice as the "management of circumstance in an economy of coincidence." He brings together the ordinary and the absurd to explore notions of chance economics, commerce, hypothetical experiences and power games. He is known as cofounder of the Vilnius Institute of 'Pataphysics and organizer of the artists' daycare center Autarkia, the eeKulgrinda experimental engineering camp, and the Visionary platform for art and business collaborations.

Elvia Wilk is a writer and editor living in Berlin. She writes for publications like *frieze*, *Artforum*, and *die Zeit*. She is a contributing editor at *Rhizome* and publications editor for *transmediale: festival for arts and digital culture*.



EW I got the same idea while I was there—there is a lot of space and freedom. Why is that? How would you compare it to another city, like Riga?

RN Vilnius was never a port like Riga, but it's historically been a very transitional point. In a way it's where different ideas have been living together since the Middle Ages.

In recent times, the CAC definitely has a huge role in the history of the city, as a building and as a structure. There was good soil. The George Soros Fund was there in the 1990s and really helped to launch some international careers. There are a few more characters who had an international presence, from curator Raimundas Malasauskas to Tulips and Roses gallery. There is something else going on now, a pulse, an evolution of the scene and traditions. I don't want to speculate too much, but I think in Vilnius we were lucky.

EW The only thing missing is an art market.

RN I don't know. I'm always rather positive. Somewhat lacking a market allows us to do way more experimental things.