

CONVERSATION

What do the objects in the shape of an ear tell us?

The poet and critic Sergej Timofejev in conversation with the artist Daria Melnikova and multimedia artist Agata Melnikova

In a world where nobody trusts anyone, where people rarely strive for mutual understanding, two sisters envision an exhibition about trust and interaction and an attempt at creating harmony, if only in a single exhibition space. We met in early May, in a small office on Gertrūdes Street, to mark through conversation the key points of the project by the Melnikova sisters.

Sergej Timofejev: Instead of a sketch, you sent me a photo of two of you, together with a short outline of the exhibition concept. A picture from your childhood in which you are looking at your reflections in a distorting mirror and are clearly having a lot of fun...

Daria Melnikova: It's just a photo from our family archive. We felt that it told more about the exhibition than any fragment or sketch would.

S.T.: And how old were you in the photograph?

D.M.: That was in 1994, at the amusement park in Mežaparks. I was ten, so Agata was six.

Agata Melnikova: This photo, obviously, invites associations with the distorted mirror theme. Let's say, with the Soviet film "The Kingdom of Crooked Mirrors" (Russian: Королевство кривых зеркал), where the main characters are also two girls. And we really like that film...

D.M.: We watched it again a week ago.

A.M.: In our case, though, it's not at all about truth and distortion. Purely visually, all this mirror distortion in the photo seems so "dance-like" and we are standing there, dressed in similar clothes, wearing the same colours...

D.M.: The photograph's emotional message, the feeling of contact between the two sisters, is actually really close to what we had in mind for the exhibition.

A.M.: This time we chose the theme of rapport. And we based it in a certain method called "mirroring", which has three main points: the emotional state, mimics, and the voice factor. We hoped to create something shared, alive, and at the same time multifaceted.

D.M.: Rapport – that's a French word, it means "to give back" or to "carry back". In psychology this term means establishing contact between different people or groups of people, based on a specific form of mutual understanding and trust.

A.M.: I like to compare it to metabolism in the body – it keeps you alive, but in our case the "mirroring" works at keeping harmony.

D.M.: This is our second exhibition together. The first one was last autumn in Kaspars Groševs' gallery, 427. The theme was the analysis of our family. And each object represented a certain member of our family. The new project is also quite... personal, but it's not about us directly, but rather, we take ourselves as the reference. Such a trust-filled relationship can exist not just between us, but between other people as well...

A.M.: It's also getting to know yourself through communication and an attempt to understand how you can hold this conversation on a positive note. How you can adapt to another person and how much they can adapt to you. And as a result of this mutual communication, harmony is born. Daria and I have this understanding ninety... five percent of the time.

S.T.: And how do you work? Do you think of everything and execute everything together?

D.M.: Yes, we don't simply come up with stuff on our own, made in different apartments, which we then exhibit together. We do everything together. We sit beside each other and constantly discuss things...

S.T.: But you don't specifically divide who does what?

D.M.: Agata has a musical education, but now she is also working as a visual artist. Actually, it was Agata who a few years ago suggested that we did something together, and I thought that would be great. And it really is fascinating – since my education from the Rozentāls School and the Academy of Art helps me professionally, but at the same time it also limits me. It puts me in some kind of box, which can sometimes get in my way. In this sense, Agata hasn't been corrupted by any certain "school".

A.M.: I've been corrupted by the academic music. (Laughs.)

D.M.: She works more intuitively – she thinks of combining things that I wouldn't even imagine putting together. However, I am more experienced in technical terms.

A.M.: If it weren't for Daria, everything would fall apart, it wouldn't hold together...

S.T.: Will the mirroring be expressed through the material as well? Will mirrors be used?

D.M.: No, it will be presented in the form of water as a metaphor for reflection. But, for example, our objects from organic glass will resemble, in form, that same mirror from the 1994 photo.

A.M.: Actually everything is more like a metaphor here. Besides, the whole exhibition is built to comply with the principle of reflection – symmetrical layout of objects. For example, the objects hanging from the walls facing each other are themselves remotely involved in a harmonic "dialogue".

D.M.: Also, the central objects resemble the shape of an ear, which in our concept is yet another important visual metaphor for being able to listen to each other. To hear and to perceive.

S.T.: In psychology, "mirroring" is a skill in copying one another to achieve mutual understanding. Though if we're talking about "mirroring" in physical sense – there is always a primary object and a secondary object, its reflection. It's not quite like that for you.

A.M.: That's the point that it's a "dancing" mirroring, a "dancing" resemblance... It sort of is, but then at some point it retreats. In the exhibition this "dancing-ness" is expressed through wavy lines, amorphous, blurred shapes... For example, geometricity played a big role in our previous exhibition, but this time around we are trying to avoid that.

D.M.: Only at first sight might our objects seem the same, absolutely "mirrored." But here, each object has a distinguishing feature in the form of tiny contrasting elements, colour shading, texture...

A.M.: ...which are distinctive of Daria's image or of mine. Also, it's not insignificant that the word "rapport" also has another meaning: the key element of ornamentation, a part of a pattern which repeats multiple times on a fabric or carpet. And we will also include an element of a repetitive pattern.

S.T.: But how did you come up with this rapport theme? I must confess this word meant absolutely nothing to me until yesterday. Which side did the suggestion to use it come from?

D.M.: Agata...

A.M.: We also had other ideas, but this one seemed the closest one. Rapport in its first meaning, by the way, is also an embodiment of the process of preparing for an exhibition, of thinking of what we are going to show to our viewers. It's that specific contact based on trust. An attempt at combining things that bring good feelings, good memories. Based on the feeling of closeness, which, in our case, can be provided by family.

S.T.: But where did the term itself come from?

A.M.: From Wikipedia. There are so many interesting things there! (Laughs). I really like digging, analysing, reaching for the essence. Let's say, at school I preferred Russian language to literature classes.

S.T.: Because there's a system...

A.M.: Yes, you can separate the root, the suffix and the ending!

D.M.: Yup, I also love that, just the composition of words! Prefixes...

A.M.: I really liked the Russian class, but I hated maths.

S.T.: But there's also a system there too...

A.M.: Well, perhaps I have been approaching this systematicity gradually. Beginning with language. Today I would probably enjoy maths. Meanwhile, Daria always liked adding, calculating, all those equations made sense to her from day one – I admired that. She got a 10 in in the final maths exam.

D.M.: Well, anyone from a regular school would have gotten a 10 in maths at our school.

S.T.: Still, what was it with this rapport thing? How did it become your concept?

A.M.: I was just searching for something on the topic of reflection – what it means in philosophy, psychology, culture. And so I found "rapport".

S.T.: I also took a look at the Wikipedia article before our conversation. And it says there Mesmer first used this term in the 18th century. That it's associated with mesmerism...

D.M.: With hypnosis?

S.T.: Roughly. He had a theory that everyone can transmit their thoughts to another person through magnetic fluids. Like human electricity.

D.M.: I agree with that. Absolutely.

S.T.: Now, however, all this is considered a pseudoscience.

D.M.: Pseudoscience?

S.T.: Yes, this is exactly what it says in Wikipedia! (Laughs)

D.M.: I still feel that this electricity between people does exist.

S.T.: At least between you two?

A.M.: Between us – definitely!

Sergej Timofejev is a poet, a member of text-group Orbita, and the editor at Arterritory.com, where the original conversation in Russian was published on May 19th.