



Grinbergs, Andris (b. 1946)

by Mark Allen Svede

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Difficult as it is to overstate the hazards of making art that positively, compellingly expresses homosexual desire within a Western homophobic society, the risks that Soviet artists faced if they dared to express affirmative homosexual content were horrific, including incarceration in a psychiatric prison or a staged "suicide" at the hands of KGB agents.

Despite the potentially lethal consequences of living as a bisexual and working as a nonconformist artist under totalitarianism, Latvian performance artist Andris Grinbergs pioneered Happenings, body art, and underground filmmaking in Soviet-occupied Latvia from the late 1960s onward.

Born on March 3, 1946, Grinbergs was training as a clothing designer at Riga's Applied Arts School when the so-called "youthquake" brought international hippie fashion to cities on the western periphery of the Soviet Union. Before long, he was outfitting his fellow flower children in bell-bottomed jeans and lacy, unisex blouses--that is, if they chose to wear anything.

When these aspiring artists, writers, and musicians participated in the numerous Happenings organized by Grinbergs, he designed their highly imaginative costuming, much of which was designed to come off.

From the beginning--including the 1972 Happening, *The Wedding of Jesus Christ*, during which Grinbergs married his lifelong (female) partner Inta Jaunzeme--these performances celebrated same-sex passion.

In 1972, a time when even representations of heterosexual eroticism were curbed by Soviet censors, Grinbergs directed the short film *Self-Portrait*, which forthrightly depicted his bisexuality. The artist tenderly kisses a man in a public toilet, enfolds a near-naked youth in his fur coat, and cuddles in bed with another man, both of them nude, while a party proceeds around them.

Elsewhere in this carnivalesque setting, a trio of naked women dances together, one of them deflating a man's balloon phallus with a burning cigarette when he amorously approaches her; and a homoerotic vignette recalls the martyrdom of St. Sebastian.

The central third of the film features Grinbergs and Jaunzeme copulating, seen from the shoulders up in the reticent manner of Andy Warhol's film *Blowjob*. The montage of campy artifice and nude performance-art documentation resumes in the final third of *Self-Portrait*, concluding with a playful shot of Grinbergs in bed with his wife and male cinematographer.

Two weeks after the film's completion, its sole print escaped discovery when KGB agents raided Grinbergs's flat during a private, unsanctioned photography exhibit. For twenty-three years, *Self-Portrait* remained concealed in fragmentary form in Riga.

After its 1996 restoration and premiere at Anthology Film Archives in New York, filmmaker and independent film authority Jonas Mekas proclaimed *Self-Portrait* "one of the five most sexually transgressive films ever

made." Mekas's judgment is all the more impressive in light of his own arrest record for screening landmarks of queer cinema in the mid-1960s. *Self-Portrait* must be placed in the company of films by Warhol, Kenneth Anger, Jean Genet, and Jack Smith.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Grinbergs defied official Soviet proscriptions with performances inspired by phenomena as disparate as medieval sacral mysteries, the Baader-Meinhof Gang, and Bo Widerberg's film *Elvira Madigan*. After communism's demise, Grinbergs marked his 45th birthday and Latvia's passage to democracy by staging an event at which cake was served from the nude torso of the prime minister's son.

Grinbergs remains active today, his art's homoerotic content steadily expanding not only in the performance genre, but also in collages that combine gay porn magazines, classic disco album sleeves from Casablanca Records, and photographs of his male lovers.

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About the Author

Mark Svede is a historian and curator whose work often addresses marginalized artists and communities. He publishes extensively about Latvian visual culture, ranging from nonconformist art and underground film to hippie fashion and dissident architecture. He also works as a residential architect.