

Move Over Paintings. Museum Encourages Dating

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Surrounded by modern art, visitors to Erarta embark on a series of three-minute “dates” with other participants.

St. Petersburg — It’s 7 p.m. on a Thursday evening inside the Erarta Contemporary Art Museum, and the air is heavy with expectation.

Smartly dressed young men and women mill around nervously, waiting for something to happen. But these visitors to St. Petersburg’s biggest contemporary art center are not waiting for a celebrated artist to turn up, or for a brand new exhibition to open. They are here to take part in a speed dating event.

Every Thursday, Erarta is giving Petersburgers a chance to find a romantic interest, a new friend, a soul mate or simply have fun during the chilly fall evenings.

Speed dating, which pairs participants for several minutes to get to know each other before

switching partners, originated in Los Angeles in the late '90s as a way to help Jewish singles meet each other. During the last few years, it has become a regular part of St. Petersburg's social scene.

Most of the participants who came to the first event of Erarta's new fall series this month were in their mid-20s and 30s and seemed quite curious about the event, a "way to have fun" for some, and, for others, a stepping stone to matrimony.

"I read about it on my social network page where I subscribe to news from Erarta," said Svetlana, a sales manager in her mid-20s. "I called my friend, and now we are here together. It should be great fun — better than just going to a bar, for sure!"

Her friend, a young legal aide with model looks, joined in: "But besides being a good opportunity to meet new and interesting people, I guess that every one of us here tonight hopes to meet their second half, or at least have some kind of romantic continuation to the story."

Her words ring true. Although everyone is smiling and trying to act relaxed, the atmosphere in the room is electric with hope and expectation. This feeling is perhaps even more palpable among the female participants: In keeping with a commonly held belief in Russia that there are more women than men, there are 25 women and 20 men at the event. The dating takes place in two rounds, with the men remaining seated and some girls participating only once.

Among the participants were a pair of young managers of so-called pickup workshops who specialize in coaching men on meeting women. They attended the event to do some research.

We've just come back from New York, and it's very interesting for us from a theoretical point of view to experience and compare the way it is done here with the way it is over there, they said.

At last comes the moment that everyone has been waiting for: The organizer invites everybody to the "games room," the participants are given numbers and a bell is rung to signal the start of the game. Armed with a name tag, a scorecard and, hopefully, a sparkling personality, couples are paired up to begin their first date.

They are allowed to discuss anything except their careers or where they live.

Following three minutes of conversation (compared with seven in the original U.S. version), the bell is rung and the men move on to meet their next date. The process resembles a flirty version of musical chairs.

Following each date, participants mark on their card whether they would be interested in meeting that date again. If a mutual interest is noted, the organizers of the event will give each party the other's phone number.

Although the participants at times seem nervous — searching for a place to put their hands, the most comfortable way to sit, or a relaxed but beguiling pose to attract the attention of their new date — everyone seems happy by the end of the evening. While they might not have met their soul mate, most have at least been on the receiving end of some smiles and compliments.

“There have already been six events held at the Erarta gallery, and they have been a great success. Dozens of couples have received the contact details of each other and continued to communicate on a regular basis,” said Ivan Danyushkin, the event’s organizer. “And although the first speed dating party took place just six months ago, one couple who met during a speed dating evening at Erarta is busy preparing for their wedding.”

Speed dating events are held on Thursday evenings at 7 p.m. at the Erarta Contemporary Art Museum, 29th Line of Vasilyevsky Island. Metro Vasileostrovskaya. Single entry: 200 rubles. To register, call: +7 (812) 324-0809.

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