

AMBER JEWELRY OF SIGITAS VIRPILAITIS: POSTMODERN APPROACH

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Fig.12. Alexander Yuritsyn Sculptural composition "Tempest",
1993. Amber, wood. Height 12 cm. Length 9 cm.
Private collection.

Amber jewelry, among 20-century Lithuanian jewelry design have drawn a special attention. Before the Second World War they used to be manufactured by small craft workshops of cities and towns. Later on, based on authentic models of artists, they started to be mass-produced at the factories "Dailė" in Klaipėda and Vilnius. Amber, unlike any other material has received huge interest from both - professional and amateur artists.

Search for the national identity at the end of 19 c. related amber with a national symbol. According to Pilė Veljataga, a Lithuanian art historian, *amber as a national symbol, the image of Lithuanian women wearing amber necklaces was formed at the end of 19 c. - beginning of 20 c. by writers and poets of national liberation movement*¹. Along with truly original works, created by artists, were also, unfortunately, some works, which turned this material into banal object of pseudo-national kitsch. At any rate, there are no indifferent people for amber: it is either loved, or hated.

During the 60s and 70s amber received huge attention by "fathers" of contemporary Lithuanian jewelry - Feliksas Daukantas (1915-1995)² and Kazimieras Simanonis. While during the postwar period amber was devaluated to the level of a cheap raw material, they brought back traditions, dating back to the Antics, when amber was considered a semi-precious material. The artists strived to put emphasis on natural plastic qualities of the mineral, seeking forms, revealing them optimally. The amber in the creative work of F.Daukantas acquired minimalist forms, unlike

K.Simanonis, who used refined, rich sculptural shapes, close to the baroque plasticity. The uniqueness of these amber jewelry pieces made by the artists has been determined by a creative use of Art Nouveau esthetic principles, which brought up primary qualities of the decorative material along with use of cultural traditions, from ethnographic, baroque, Art Nouveau up to functionalism.

However, in the second part of the 70s, when F.Daukantas and K.Simanonis started to be simulated on a mass scale, amber works gained boring, repetitive shapes. Although there was a demand for Lithuanian amber and had been valued in the former USSR, in the long run it acquired the image of souvenir output, something for the mass taste. During that period, new generations³ among Lithuanian jewelers, as P.Veljataga says, became obsessed with a belief that this stone *cannot be used for a real, precious piece of jewelry (...) unraveling a decorative quality of a piece of amber did not appear an interesting task for the young generation (...) the amber disappeared from professional art horizon for long*⁴.

A similar situation of "over-satiation with amber" was developing in other countries, where it had been popular (Germany, Poland, Latvia). Mr.Ulf Erichson, Director of amber museum Ribnitz-Damgarten wrote: *although even several interesting new sculptural amber tendencies emerged, creators of jewelry were little interested in this material*⁵. However, when in the 90s the aforementioned museum took up an initiative to once again make professional artists interested in amber, the popularity of this material has significantly increased in the



*Sigitas Virpilaitis. No name. 1989.
Amber, tuguoise, silver, copper, rope*

Baltic region. During the first amber competitions, organized by museum Ribnitz-Damgarten only German authors took part, whereas during the latest contests almost all Baltic and Nordic countries were represented (Poland, Germany, Sweden, Lithuania, etc.). Alongside these contests, equally important are annually organized amber-focused international contests-fairs in Gdansk.

Approximately ten years ago, initiatives in amber "rehabilitation" were taken in Lithuania. The first important event occurred in 1989, when the Museum of Applied Art (Vilnius) hosted a non-traditional amber exhibition. Later on, an initiative was retaken by collectors Virginija and Kazimieras Mizgiris. In order to encourage our artists to seek new approach toward amber, they organized various exhibitions and contests, established specialized amber galleries in Nida and Vilnius, creative workshops for artists. They

also started to collect original ancient amber and artworks of contemporary Lithuanian artists. The initiative of Mizgiris family, not only did help amber regain the artistic prestige, but it also encourages the rejuvenation of contemporary Lithuanian jewelry.

In the 90s, amber was also chosen as a working material by well-known jewelers, reaching the level of creative maturity, such as Indrė Diržienė, Jonas and Vaidilutė Balčiūnas, Laima Kerienė, Solveiga Krivičienė, Eimantas Ludavičius. Each of them tried to discover an authentic, individual approach to amber. Some of them, such as B.Stulgaitė, were trying to rediscover the nature of this mineral, without going too far from natural shapes. Others (Ž.Bautrėnas, V.Matulionis, A.Mikutis) in a way competed with the primary qualities of the material, yielding new sculptural forms and creatively applying traditional techniques of molding, engraving, and incrustation.

Although Sigitas Virpilaitis may not be considered a

true enthusiast of amber, he is among the most interesting artists working with this material in Lithuania. His works reveal a non-traditional approach to amber, bypassing stereotypical artistic solutions and imply multifarious cultural associations. On the other hand, the amber works of the artist preserve all major qualities of contemporary jewelry artwork - individuality, expressiveness and high quality of manufacture. The purpose of this report is to reveal a uniqueness of artistic concept of the amber jewelry artist, stressing their postmodern esthetic characteristics and links with contemporary jewelry principles.

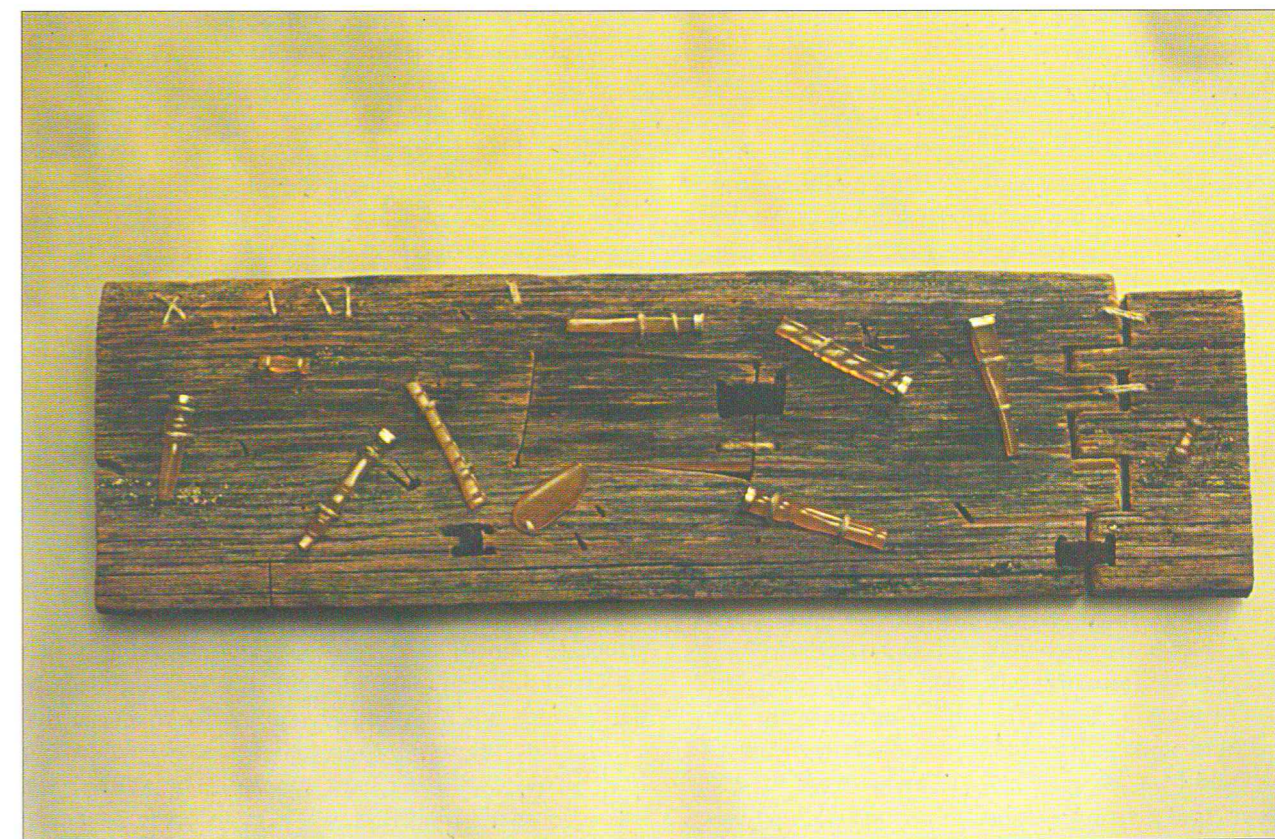
S.Virpilaitis, like most of his colleagues, during 1979 - 1984 studied in Metal Department of the Tallinn Art Institute. This institute, one of the strongest jewelry schools in the East European region implanted respect for traditions within minds of creators, educated good skill of the craft and on the other hand, encouraged interest in the latest search of contemporary jewelry and broader art context. Estonian jewelry found a fairly good balance of respect for tradi-

tions and search for novelties. Hence, the school of Tallinn was also encouraging S.Virpilaitis to choose a similar way, oriented toward drive for individuality and craft prestige, on the one hand, and search for links with multifarious cultural context, on the other hand.

The artist started to use amber as a jewelry material in 1989. The stimulus for that was the previously mentioned exhibition of non-traditional amber works in Vilnius. According to the author, *before that, everyone in Lithuania was disgusted by amber. Working with this material was simply "unstylish"*⁶.

First pieces of amber jewelry, created by S.Virpilaitis, are associated with archeological and ethnographic artifacts and thus reminding of an archaic origin of amber. The necklace "No name" (1989) by its shape reminds of an ancient amulet, while in "Brooch, attachable on the back" (1993) - relates to a part of wooden household tool. By avoiding direct references to concrete objects, which inspired the idea of the artwork, S.Virpilaitis is at a certain rate playing with magic and ritual functions, which some time ago were related to

*Sigitas Virpilaitis. Brooch, attachable on the back.
1993. Wood, silver, amber, flax threads*



the piece of jewelry. On the other hand, it is evident, that the medallion "No Name" is a modern amulet, viewed by author ironically as a tool to drive away "evil forces". Besides, in this work there are some elements of hippy culture. The amber is attached to unpretentious, colored, in some places deliberately "shabby" string. The choice of very simple, almost natural shapes and cheap material can also be associated with counter-cultural movement ideas.

According to the artist, he is consciously creating jewelry suitable for everyday use: *I like it when a piece of jewelry is worn along with a pair of jeans and becomes scratched while is used. Then, it lives*⁷. The approach of the artist matches the opinion of the modern jewelry, that the jewelry is not only a form of a decorative art, but it is also a means of expression of a certain life-philosophy. It is important for S.Virpilaitis, that his jewelry is comfortable with a modern individual, it is worn "out of love", not out of prestige. The works of the artist simply radiate democracy: here, inexpensive materials are used, complex shapes are avoided, the jewelry does not insist on wearing them on special occasions or along with a grand evening tuxedo. On the other hand, they always seem stylish, because they have qualities of individualism and elegance, attributes we are used to call "good taste".

Often these jewelry traditional rules are reconsidered in a playful manner. For instance, the artist suggests to wear a wooden brooch with an amber not on the chest, as it is accepted, but on the back ("Brooch, attachable on the back", 1993). Although the author's intention here is not to impress the viewer or make him angry, in this way he demonstrates an independent approach toward traditions. The artist does not ignore widely accepted rules; he just turns them upright down in an elegant way, and gives a playful, but not a perverse character to a chosen solution. In this search, the influence of Fluxus and other art trends of second half of the 20 century, interpreting art as a game, is revealed. Along with Fluxus, is also the artist's interest in creating jewelry from different used articles, such as wristlets of watches or collars of his wife's old heavy coat.

Although in the first amber jewelry pieces of S.Virpilaitis, likewise in his works with other materials, a tendency to archaizing is characteristic, by the end of 90s his artworks reflect a totally different trend.

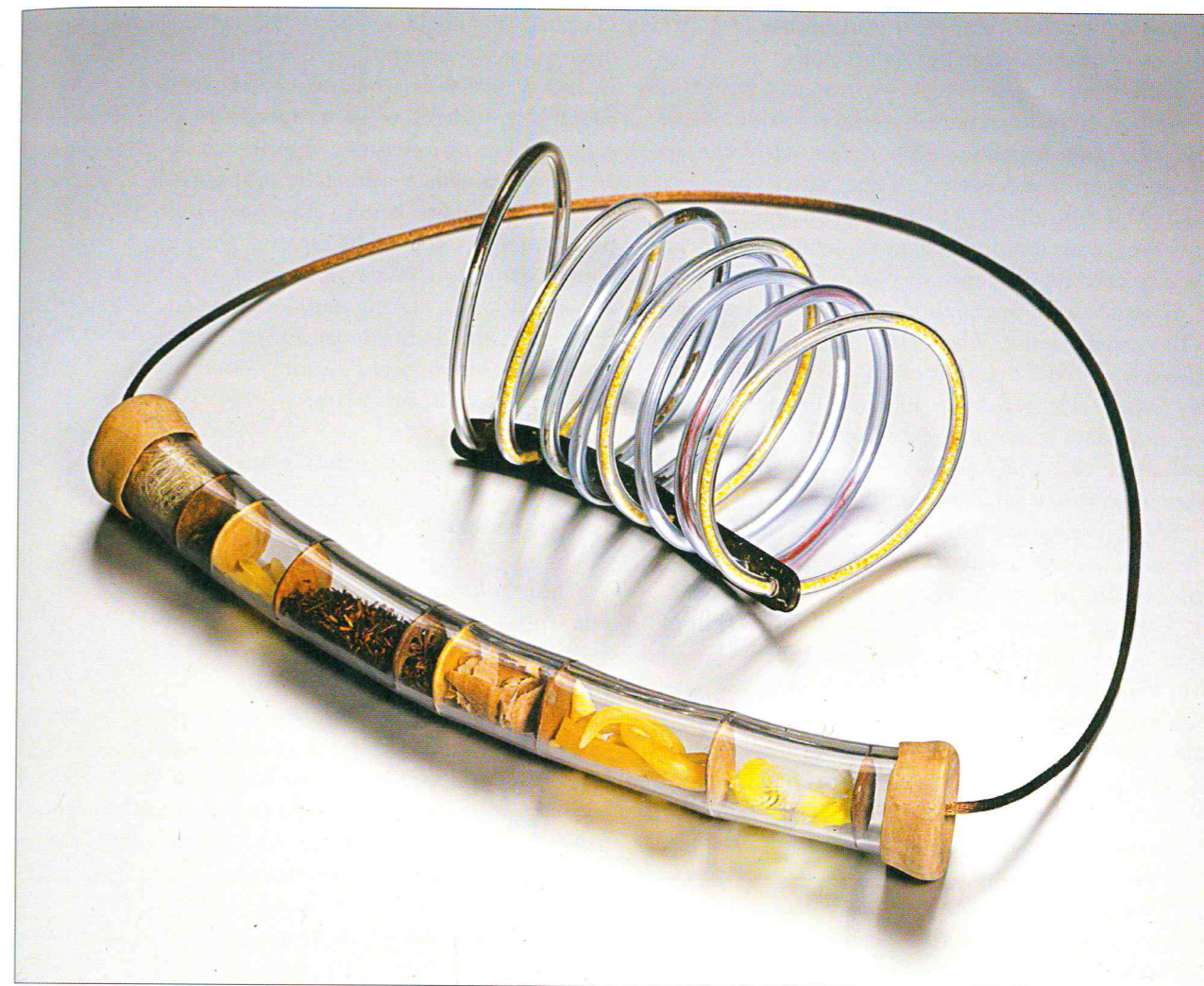
Once again, a specific exhibition made the artist return to work with amber. The previously mentioned Mr. and Mrs. Mizgiris in 1999 encouraged the artist to set up a personal exhibition in their Vilnius-based

gallery. S.Virpilaitis recalls: *Inside my mind I was getting ready for the exhibition for about half a year, because for the entire time I thought, that the amber must be treated differently. From the very beginning I was sure, that there would be no metal. The composition of amber and metal makes the jewelry seem cheap at once. These two materials combined just do not fit and look poor. Amber is yellow, soft and light. Thus it is difficult to treat. On the other hand, while working with amber you cannot make sketches. When it comes to your mind, you start working with it and you see that it all turns out differently. I was also sure, that I did not want to use neither soldering, nor polishing. I may use glue or fasten up something by strings. When choosing materials to be combined with amber, color mattered most to me. I wanted to use color. And, surely, the texture...But anyway, amber had the prevailing power*⁸.

At the show⁹, the artist exhibited a dozen pieces of jewelry and objects, where amber was combined with rather unusual materials, at least in Lithuania, such as plastic, bamboo, coconut or tea leaves, coffee salt or fox fur. In some cases he chose them because of their colorific qualities, such as, for instance, a slightly brown bamboo in "Neck Jewelry" (1999), which was in harmony combined with soft yellow opaque amber, or contrasted with dark rubber ("Neck Jewelry".1999). Elsewhere, textures were more emphasized. Along with amber, thread and fox fur were used. Qualities, joining different materials were brought out - softness, warmth and lightness.

All combinations with amber in these works are based not so much on physical qualities of materials, but more on abstract terms such as *soft, transparent, light*, expressing resemblance to these qualities. Differently than in artworks of most of other Lithuanian artists, here unique amber qualities are revealed not through the mineral surface or morphology, but through associations. Transparent plastic pipes with feathers inside them, coffee salt, tealeaves remind of transparent amber and its inclusion, the fur - with softness and warmth, characteristic of this stone.

In this way the artist brings into question the local tradition of amber works, which constantly emphasized amber, materials combined with it (mostly metal), perceiving it mostly as an auxiliary and oftentimes a constructive element. S.Virpilaitis combines amber with a variety of different materials - metal, wood, leather, rubber, threads but does not overemphasize them. In this way he is trying to oppose a belief, that no material in itself is more valuable than another. The amber, just like silver may be banal as well as expressive in an artis-



Sigitas Virpilaitis. Necklace and bracelet. 1999.
Plastic, amber, wood, feathers, coffee salt, tealeaves

tic way. S. Virpilaitis considers possibilities of plastic expression of the material to be crucial.

Such an approach reflects postmodern beliefs of the author, in contrast with modern tradition of jewelry. The latter has enforced a certain *hierarchical* approach toward materials, when alternative cheap materials were considered to be more contemporary than traditional ones (gold, silver, precious stones). Meanwhile, given the influence of postmodern aesthetics, all materials were once more acknowledged as equal in the artistic sense. The issues of artistic status of materials are no longer important for the contemporary jewelry. However, just like in other areas of fine arts, nowadays it is much more important to seek the confluence of art and life and its integration within other areas (mass culture, fashion, information).

S. Virpilaitis also uses these principles in his works. The postmodern aesthetics incorporate a combination of different artistic traditions (archaic, modernist, Fluxus), elements of "high" and "low" (Hippy) cultures, tendency to join a means of specific jewelry with means characteristic of other areas. An artist often treats amber as an archeologist: he does not change it, even if it is a number of cheap fractions, leave it the way it was found, thus showing, that this stone is interesting to him as a relic of archaic past. It is not a coincidence that some plastic pipes slightly remind of neatly kept museum articles. Meanwhile, the combination of amber and fox fur has probably been inspired by present ideas of "second hand", thriving within Lithuanian street fashion.

Hence, S. Virpilaitis is inspired by a variety of contemporary culture forms. The artist does not avoid commentaries on stereotypes and certain clichés of present jewelry, as well as a critical approach to tradition of creating and wearing jewelry. The individual approach of the creator in this case becomes crucial. On the other hand, the artist tries not to enclose himself within narrow frames of the genre. Each of his works is in a way a new intellectual intrigue, hiding beyond itself a rich dialogue of past and present cultures. Amber works of S. Virpilaitis seem like playing with histories of different ages, and it is the right of a viewer to create an ultimate interpretation of their collision.

Unlike most Lithuanian jewelers, this artist does not enjoy primary, natural, inborn beauty of amber. First of all, he puts forward intellectual, but not decorative aspects of the artwork. Amber is seen through a new prism and is considered not as a unique stone from the Baltic region or national symbol, but as a

material, that could invoke various cultural associations, oftentimes having nothing to do with national identity. In this way the artist realizes a drive for a *different* approach, considered to be important in the present art. An ability to operate signs of different cultural contexts and unrestrained devotion to mind-born associations testify to S. Virpilaitis being a subsequent representative of postmodern jewelry. His creative work gives a special contribution to a new reflection of experiencing different past cultures, making an intercombination of very different artistic traditions and even marginal elements, casting a contemporary outlook, saturated with authentic an approach of the creator.

Translated by Simonas Šorys

References:

¹ Šiuolaikiniai lietuvių dailininkai Gintaro galerijoje-muziejuje, kat./[ž. aut. P. Veljataga. Vilnius, 1998. P.3

² Feliksas Daukantas (died 1995) worked only with amber.

³ Its core was formed by the artists who had graduated from the Metal Department of Tallinn Art Institute in late 70s Vytautas Matulionis, Birutė Stulgaitė, Marytė Gurevičienė, Arvydas Gurevičius and also Aleksandras Šepkus, who studied design in Vilnius Art Institute.

⁴ Šiuolaikiniai lietuvių dailininkai Gintaro galerijoje-muziejuje, kat./[ž. aut. P. Veljataga. Vilnius, 1998, P.4

⁵ Moderne Bernsteinkunst/Modern Amber Art. Ribnitz-Damgarten, 1999, P.8.

^{6 7 8} from author's interview with the artist, recorded on January 10, 2001.

⁹ A personal exhibition of Sigitas Virpilaitis was hosted by Mizgiris Amber Gallery, Vilnius, in 1999.

THE LEGEND OF AMBER IN LITHUANIAN THEATRE

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Although today Lithuania has less than a hundred kilometres of Baltic seaside, the most beautiful Lithuanian tales and legends are related to the sea. The most popular of them *Eglė the Queen of the Grass Snakes* is one of the most original Lithuanian miracle tales, and the romantic legend about the unhappy love between the queen of the Baltic sea the goddess Jūratė and a fisherman Kastytis also tells the story of the origins of amber.

In the classical mythology the appearance of amber is related to the myth of Phaethon, who took his father's Helios, the god of the Sun chariot, however he could not control it and fell into the river Po. His sisters, Helios's daughters had mourned for Phaethon's death and then turned into poplars, and their tears have dropped from the young eyes and harden into amber in the sunshine and the river sends them to the Latin brides to enjoy and admire¹.

The Lithuanian legend of amber tells about it not as a thing, but about the place of its discovery – the coast of the Baltic sea. This is the legend of Jūratė and Kastytis, recorded in 1842 and written-down by the historian, writer and poet Liudvikas Adomas Jucevičius, who was famous for his romantic attitude towards Lithuanian history. The main heroine of this legend – the sea goddess Jūratė – is not mentioned in Lithuanian mythology – thus it is more likely that this tale is not of mythological, but of literary-romantic origin. L.A. Jucevičius mentions this legend in his treatise *The Memories of the Samogitian Land*, which

was published in Vilnius in 1842. Firstly, the writer mentions a tale about the Baltic sea, which he heard as a child – *about you, about your queen, about the sirens, about the amber palace, looming in your depths*² and later gives the whole story. There he mentions Jūratė's palace, whose walls were of *pure white amber, thresholds of gold, the roof of fishscales, the windows of purest diamonds*³. Jūratė gets angry that Kastytis – *a worthless mortal dares to destroy the peace, my innocent subjects get caught in his nets and are condemned to death*⁴. Together with her fellow goddesses she took one of a hundred amber boats, decorated with pearls and went to punish Kastytis: *Let as lure him with our dance and admiration into the cold embrace of the sea, let us execute our vengeance, strangle him with our embraces, and cover his beautiful eyes, admired by all Samogitian girls, with wet gravel*. The image of Kastytis in L.A. Jucevičius's story is represented in detail – he is *young and beautiful, his cheeks are covered only with the first beard, his face is the most beautiful, prolonged and white, and his hair is black and long*. However his soul and heart are calm and thoughts practical: Kastytis is *dreaming about an abundant catch*. In the legend, written by L.A. Jucevičius Jūratė is represented as severe and imperious – *with the crown on her head, with the amber stick of power* When Kastytis, lured by the songs of Jūratė's friends, is going to fall into their arms, Jūratė holds them back. She says to Kastytis: *Your youth and beauty are very attractive to me: if you promise to love me, then you will find happiness in my arms*. This sounds not like a declaration of love, but like an order. Kastytis