

Xavier Antin talks to Alice Motard, Curator at Spike Island from 2014 to 2016

Alice Motard: What was your first reaction when I invited you to work with me on an exhibition around Beau Geste Press? My brief must have seemed a bit vague as I didn't quite know how to engage with the subject – although I did see some important parallels between the work of Beau Geste Press and your own, albeit with forty years' difference.

Xavier Antin: I immediately understood why you extended this invitation to me because I have a strong affinity with the way Beau Geste Press approached the production, reproduction and distribution of art, and not least their political stance. I was aware of their books but I didn't know their history, and after finding out more about them – among others by reading the essay by Zanna Gilbert that you sent me¹ – I saw their practice as a proto-form of the current digital age, with a similar use of local and autonomous means of production paired with a global network of knowledge and social exchange. It also fell in line with my current research on topics such as the imaginary associated with techniques and technology, the organ/body agency of machines and the political resonances of autonomous production. Still, I initially struggled to engage with this legacy as my work tends towards subjective interpretations.

Alice Motard: A turning point in conceiving the exhibition was our time in the Tate Archive earlier this year, looking at the material acquired in the early 1980s through David Mayor, the co-founder of Beau Geste Press. We soon realised that gathering information from the archive was a complicated task, not only because of the sheer amount of documents (126 boxes and over 3,700 records) but also because of their status as evidence (or not) of the publishing venture that was Beau Geste Press. We ended up trying to imagine life and work at Langford Court, tracking the slightest clue of productive activity – which, I believe, was the moment when you really found your place in the project as an artist.

Xavier Antin: I agree, going through the archives was very inspiring. We considered all sorts of options, from displaying all the publications produced during the short-lived existence of Beau Geste Press to showing none. Browsing the archives was like an inquiry into the life of the Beau Geste Press community itself. It was less about the people themselves than about what they had experienced as a group. It was as if we were trying to get to the very heart of their story and retrace it with the help of intimate clues or moments. But there was always a blind spot at the centre of this research. This blind spot was us looking at the archives: documents in polyester files manipulated by blue latex gloves; photocopies mixed in with originals; typewritten letters, some private, others published; pre-publication masters that were very similar to the published version except for a few marks; books that were never published; unique documents; multiple editions; etc. The more we dug up from the archive, the more the image became blurred – and it's precisely this dizzying experience that I found fascinating.

Alice Motard: For me, it was interesting to see that we were not necessarily attracted by the same things. You were looking for traces or gestures of the printing activity, when I was mainly trying to understand how the community at Langford Court organised itself and managed to be connected to so many other artists all over the world. It wasn't until I came across the "screenplay" written by David Mayor, in which he describes life in the house, that I was able to embrace these projections.² I believe you had a similar experience . . .

Xavier Antin: Yes, when I realised that what we were looking for was eluding us, that we were trying to "strip down" the life of normal people who happened to form a community and publish books of other, like-minded people, and that all of the energy and magic was actually in the published books themselves – although they're not easy to find these days – I knew that part of the interest of this project lay in our belief and the inquiry itself. This is when I decided to work around this very fact, this staged fascination for the moment the printed matter takes form, the moment the images reveal themselves behind the scene, or behind the book.

Alice Motard: Can you talk us through your installation for *The Eternal Network*? What did you want to achieve and to what extent will visitors be able to follow your thoughts?

Xavier Antin: The installation I conceived for Spike Island could be described as a fantasised printing workshop where the actions and gestures are suspended in time. A kind of dimly lit camera obscura where the – electrically autonomous – light emanating from the anthropomorphic lamps plays the role of a functional element that simultaneously illuminates and investigates the display devices, exposing them as much as looking at them. There is no original publication in the exhibition except the two spreads presented under a kind of insulation or scanner glass. What I wanted to do in this space was to capture, as though in a photograph, the moments of production/reproduction in the imaginary workshop of a counterfeiter or investigator-reprographer working on Beau Geste Press.

Last spring I had a discussion around this idea of suspended time and judgment with a friend, the art critic Flora Katz, who introduced me to the phenomenological concept of *epoché*. The term was coined by Edmund Husserl to describe a kind of bracketing of the world, a suspension of judgement enabling the philosopher to “really see” the world without pre-determining it. But while we can stop the machines and suspend their course of action, we ourselves are always in movement in the world, in time and in space.

Besides this question of time and space suspended, I was interested in the idea of networks and circulation. On the one hand, the sculptures relate to each other as different moments in the same process of reproduction, while on the other, there are bootleg or pirate copies of books disseminated throughout the exhibition space. This idea of circulation is further amplified by the various geographic origins of the books, notably the different issues of *Schmuck* magazine.

‘The eternal network’ therefore also refers to the action of putting something back into circulation, of bringing it back to life via the copy, of using the copy to try and recover an original experience. This is of course in keeping with the Fluxus spirit: the work as a musical score rather than an artefact, a message rather than an object.

At the end of the day, this exhibition is as much about Beau Geste Press as about the questions raised by your invitation. If you really want to embrace the work of Beau Geste Press, it’s probably best to look at the books that still exist and research their story, because it allows you to grasp its topicality and marvel at what these people achieved in just a few years – particularly keeping in mind that bookmaking was much more time-consuming than today. One of the reasons for this output is certainly their autonomy. So I suppose they deserve a historical exhibition – but that’s another project.

1 Zanna Gilbert, *Something Unnameable in Common: Translocal Collaboration at the Beau Geste Press*, *ARTMargins* (2012), www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/ARTM_a_00019#.V48TCK4iOt8.

2 A copy is available in the exhibition.

The exhibition Xavier Antin, *The Eternal Network* by Xavier Antin is presented at Spike Island from 9 July to 18 September 2016.

The Eternal Network is supported by Fluxus Art Projects. Additional support is provided by Centre national des arts plastiques, France.



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



PATRONS
of NEW ART
BRISTOL



Spike Island

133 Cumberland Road, Bristol BS1 6UX

Tel. 0117 929 2266

www.spikeisland.org.uk

admin@spikeisland.org.uk

SpikelIsland

@_SpikelIsland

@SpikelIsland