"When A met X or History as a Construction"

A conversation between Anda Boluža and French artist Xavier Antin
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Works by French artist Xavier Antin are currently on display at the Latvian National Museum of Art in the You have 1243 Messages exhibition, which looks at life before the Internet and also includes, among other things, exhibits that look at the nature of the Soviet-era cultural chameleon. As Xavier Antin says, history is being rewritten continuously, it is being reconstructed from the perspective of the present. While Xavier focuses on historical paradoxes connected with technological development, the exhibition provides an opportunity to reassess the recent past for those born in the era of socialism.

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Please tell me a little bit more about your work, featured in the exhibition – Just In Time or a Short History of Production
The work covers a whole century, during which time the automation of production and work developed. At the same time, it illustrates the evolution of technology. The mimeograph, spirit duplicator, inkjet printer, laser printer – each printing device is associated with a specific social and political context when it was invented and used. It is a genealogical chain of technology. In my work, all these multi-generational devices work together to create an image, layer by layer. Each period is given its own colour, which is printed by the corresponding printing device. The images have been found in archives or books and document people working in factories. They relate to an unconscious perception of what a production chain might look like, to make the products that we consume.

You often include historical facts in your work. For example, the first prototype of a digital camera, it turns out, was created in 1975, when Kodak did not believe it had a future.
We live in a time oriented towards the future, our period is characterised by the accelerated march of time and speculation about the future, we see speculative design, speculative sociology. People are infatuated with the future, forgetting the factor of history. In the summer, I spent several months in California's Silicon Valley, mainly to learn about projects related to artificial intelligence and blockchains. The people in this specific region are building the future. Google, Facebook, YouTube – all of these have been created over the past fifteen to twenty years. Scientific discoveries and inventions of technology are currently happening so quickly that the past is ignored, but it I feel it is important to be conscious of the wider time scale.

How has the timeline been addressed in your other works?
It is the invisible evidence of time I am interested in, which includes technologies. From the point of view of technological history, the inkjet printer has a lot more in common with the weaving loom than with conventional printing equipment, and the fact that the loom is the great-great grandmother of the computer can also be understood through that very inkjet printer. Initially, weaving was done by hand, but at the beginning of the 19th century, the automation of weaving equipment began, the first programming language was created within the textile industry. The fact that this equipment could now be run by low-skilled workers led to huge protests by weavers in Great Britain. The Luddites, participants in the protests, demolished this modern equipment, and the only way to quieten down protests and appease the public was to impose the death sentence on those who dared to destroy weaving looms. In our time, when someone is called a Luddite, indicating that this person is an opponent of technology, is not truly appropriate, because the main reason for the Luddite protests was the rapid change in social structures caused by technological advancement. This historic story is told by an inkjet printer operating on similar principles to weaving equipment – the image is woven from lines of colour and the printer itself is digital, programmed. I have included it in several projects, including the exhibition News from Nowhere, held at the Maison d'art Bernard Anthonioz in 2014.
The project When "I" met "K" came about after I discovered a research project about left-wing printers in the 19th century in the United States. At that time, printers and newspapers, which were originally

one page in size, were given an important role in maintaining the circulation of information across the broad territories of the United States. Each town or city, even small ones, had its own printing office. The printers had to be educated, because the work required the composition of handwritten text and the correction of errors, their tasks lay somewhere between craft and industry, and the work required comprehensive knowledge and skills. In printing texts, they inevitably developed their own political stance. At that time, there were various guilds or unions of printers, including those which, atypically for the thinking dominating the US, attracted left-wing members. Usually, apprentices were sent to a wide variety of places to gain experience and skills, but the left-wing anarchists had to be cautious, so they adopted a secret code. When an apprentice was asked which union he represented, during the discussion he would pick up the letter "I" and twirl it in his hands. As a confirmation that the sign had been understood, the questioner picked out the letter "K". It is not known why these particular letters were chosen, but I am fascinated by the fact that the letters were used as a code in another system. I have also integrated these letters into my work.

You mentioned speculative design, which models future scenarios, but could it be said that you are interested in understanding speculative history?
Yes, that could be said. I am interested in the concept of micro-history introduced in the 1970s, which involves discovering history through the exploration and interconnection of numerous detailed archives. A specific period of history is studied through looking at, for example, the everyday life of a butcher or a shopkeeper, attempting to speculatively create unifying threads that mark out the whole.

In my opinion, the changes introduced by technological development are hard to grasp, one needs the distance of time. People are still meeting each other, reading books.
Yes, certainly. However, the book is a fantastic invention – the composition of text, its breakdown into pages is such a convenient way to travel through times and places, while, for example, other ancient text records were too impractical to be preserved until our time. Originally, books were only owned by influential people, because they were handwritten and difficult to reproduce, but after the invention of Johann Gutenberg, the printing of books became more convenient and quicker, as a result of which the book was eliminated as an instrument of power, launching significant changes in Christianity. In my view, it was technological development that drove change, but that would not have been possible without public involvement – the people were dissatisfied with the power elite and the existing system of indulgences. Humanity develops technologies, their application spreads until they change people themselves, their behaviour and habits – I am interested in this relationship. For example, the importance of the Internet in people's lives is undeniable, but at the same time, networking has always existed. Technologies are a projection of mankind, they have been created by people at a certain moment in history with a notion of how things should be done, and in my opinion, history is determined precisely by technological development.

Your News from Nowhere exhibition arose as a response to the English designer William Morris. Please tell us more about that.
In 1890, William Morris wrote the novel News from Nowhere or an Epoch of Rest, which takes place in the 21st century. When he wakes up in 2003, London has returned to nature, people live in small villages and cooperate, money does not exist. The novel may seem naive, but it is the means by which he explains his views on political and social issues. In his opinion, the most meaningful activity that shaped society was craftsmanship. People create things, share or exchange them, maintaining social and economic ties. The pursuit of craftsmanship was William Morris's response to the beginning of the industrial age. Kelmscott Manor, which he owned, was in the countryside near London and it is believed that in its garden he gained the inspiration for the plant and flower motifs that he implemented in his pattern designs. His future awakening, described in the novel, takes place directly at Kelmscott Manor. When I was preparing for the exhibition at the Maison d'Art Bernard Anthonioz, in a 17th-century building with a garden, I began to log plants and flowers with the equipment available to me – I filmed them, studied their close-ups, scanned details. I use the visual material obtained as a motif for decorating the walls of the exhibition space. I printed the large-format textiles myself using inkjet printers, thus keeping the connection with weaving equipment. I

made a bench for visitors to sit down and look out to the garden through the window.

The flower motifs created by William Morris are, however, characterised by a different aesthetic. Could it be said that aesthetic quality stems from the nature and technique of the reproduction itself? For example, the images in your work Just In Time or a Short History of Production and currently displayed at the LNMM exhibition do not however look like historic photographs, but like contemporary versions thereof.
The visuals of this edition were printed with four different printers. The image reproductions are imprecise and in places indistinct because a printer has begun to run out of ink or the surface of the paper was uneven. The method I have chosen in combining multiple printers involves difficulty, which makes the result unusual. I have created a meaningful production chain, each unit has its own significance in the production process, but the result itself is beyond my control, it has its own inherent aesthetic quality.

Perhaps the contemporary expression emerges as a result of experimentation with technology.
That could be said. In 2010, I released the publication Printing at Home, carrying out various experiments with the printer. The belief that we are not only consumers of this technology, but that we can also disassemble the equipment, understand its operating principles and construction is very important, it is the basis of our entire political understanding of hacking. These questions are also addressed in Just In Time or a Short History of Production. The mimeograph invented by Edison, which allowed anyone to operate it and achieve a consistent result, was patented in 1880 when Frederick Taylor was working on his book Principles of Scientific Management, foreseeing the further division of labour in factories.

We studied at the same university – the Royal College of Art, where Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, authors of the speculative design theory, also lectured. Did this experience affect you?
What is a design, and what does it mean to create a design? These were the main issues addressed at the college. In the past, design was perceived as a tool of capitalism, but in the 1970s doubts were raised about capitalism itself as an unfulfilled political promise, a crisis emerged, postmodernism became topical in architecture and design. Design gained the role of a critical-thinking and social-science instrument. During my studies I was influenced mainly by members of the Abake collective and the designers like Martino Gamper, who believes that our only tool is design thinking.

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