

You've got 1243 unread messages

Kaspars Vanags & Kitija Vasiljeva

Kaspars Vanags: I'm Kaspars Vanags, nowadays a Riga based curator. I started my artistic, so to say, activities back in the 90s. So there's this moment when you think it's time to make an exhibition about the analogue era. I'm belonging to that generation which remembers very vividly actually this kind of slow change. I remember that when I started in early 90s in Berlin and I was discussing with my first lover this kind of... He had his new McIntosh monument computer and I said: "You can never write poetry such beautifully on computers as you can do on a typewriter". And my generation always have this bump, or I don't know how to describe it, in the middle finger from writing with a pen, you know? People don't have it nowadays anymore, but that means that media is also something that involves your body and we know that we think not just with the brain, but with our whole bodies. That this kind of relationship between body, mind and the media is extremely interesting also for the exhibition we are working on.

Kitija Vasiljeva: My name is Kitija Vasiljeva and I'm working at the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art. My official title is Project Director, but I would like to think of myself as a person who connect people and who puts projects in action and then also realizes them until they actually materialize. I've been working in the centre since 2014 and leading projects. We worked together. I met Kaspers when he was the curator of Venice Biennale, the Latvian pavilion in Venice. That's the first project we worked on together. It was Katrīnas Neiburgas and Andra Eglīša's installation Armpit. I think this idea of analogue exhibition has been there since 2015. I remember that towards the end of the exhibition we had a great collaboration so we kind of started talking about we should made this exhibition happen. And so ever since it's slowly, slowly developing. The title of the exhibition is "You've got 1243 unread messages. The last generation before Internet. Their Lives.". The idea of this title is quite literal. We actually want to give to the visitor these 1243 unread messages. It's either in the form of an artwork artefact story or a device. The one thing that we wanted to avoid is to create this kind of larger narrative about analogue era or to make some larger claims of this period. Kaspers was already mentioning nostalgia. I think the one way how we thought about how we can scape from it is by looking at stories of the individuals. So these are, you could say, micro narrative history.

Kaspars Vanags: You could say that, first of all, economy in the Soviet Union was so called planned economy. So the plans were made on the upper levels. Taking into consideration the data which came from the lower ones, but the whole communication was actually vertical. From lower levels upwards or from upper levels

downwards. And the same was also about distribution channels. And planned economy is called planned in a way because it doesn't accept a moment of chance. We have taken into consideration also that the whole media were run in the same way, through vertical structures and you didn't have little publishing houses or what we nowadays would call self-publishing possibilities. Everything was run by state publishing houses. For example, some of this movement, of underground printing and exchange of information was really horizontal in a way that they didn't have... it was actually very 21st century this structure. If you had printed a book on a typewriter using carbon copy, then actually you could make just like six maximum, six copies. And the sixth copy was already really, really pale. So when you were distributing those six copies, then it depended on somebody else in this network who will find time, energy and also courage to make another six copies, but actually after two steps, you already don't know who is going to make this copy. You don't know those people. That's what I call horizontal network. It's something a little bit like Wikipedia nowadays, but it's very tricky to make those comparisons.

Kitija Vasiljeva: I think other thing we should mention about the exhibition is that we also don't want to make a distinction between east and west. So it's not that we want to show the analogue era in Latvia or how different it was to the west. I think we'd rather try to look for similarities. Or there could be differences, but it's not to say that everything in the east, because the Soviet Union, happened in a certain way and in the west it was completely different.

We have an archive that we hold, that is the archive of Latvian contemporary art let's say and often in our exhibitions we take the archive as a starting point. It's both exhibitions that developed from our archive as well as publications. We also do publishing work. So we are very much interested in kind of rewriting Latvian contemporary art. Rewriting the Soviet and recent past and it's very much caught into that line, our work.

Kaspars Vanags: So the exhibition deals with, not just the media, not just this analogue era social networking tools. It's more about how these tools helped to build up horizontal partnerships, which were sometimes unconnected from the political or ideological systems. Or also to see how these tools of personal archiving and social networking helped to shape one's identity or to stage one's identity. It's also interesting to mention that we, although this exhibition takes place in an art museum, are equally interested in the artefacts and these media tools in the context of everyday life and also how these tools, like diaries or personal archives or postal correspondence... What kind of role these tools played in early conceptualist art practices. So we compared those kind of everyday practices, these artistic practices, and asked about the role of creativity in everyday life, and how things which were extremely creative back then are now very normal things and the teenagers do it in Instagram or on Facebook. So it's starting from chess play by post, where you have as many postcards as many moves you have got, up to correspondence or mail art. We start from regular diaries people have been writing for centuries and see how these diaries transform in the 60s and 70s in art installations, in self-reflective video art or conceptual pieces. We are interested in photo albums as something what is dying out nowadays. And we ask how photography

was used both as an archive or photo album, just used both as an archive, that's where you stored the photos, but also as a communication channel, when actually the photo album is a staged show of sequences, you know? When you're paging through... Or when you're putting the photos in the photo album you actually are thinking also about who is going to page it through and how the sequences or narratives develop or so.

Mara Zeikare read in latvian: Here he's writing that he's waking up at 6.30, then he makes coffee and bread. Then he's... Well, everywhere is snowing and he's walking outside, and there are 5 centimetres of snow. And then he goes into his garage and looks, maybe his car is freezing. He has an Alfa Romeo car.

Kaspars Vanags: So instead of giving this encyclopaedic overview of the era, the exhibition is more like a poetic walk through those last decades before the Internet. So these narrative structures of the exhibitions depend on those macrohistorical events, but the idea is that this analogue era or those last decades before Internet were really the peak of those analogue technologies. People were also actually swimming in information and they have this kind of traditional forms of diaries and most of those artefacts are still here in this era of digitalization, it's something like if we are getting on board of a spaceship to leave to a new planet and we can't take everything with us. So this exhibition is also somehow a reminder that to digitalize those archives is not enough because, as I said at the beginning, they are body related, they are material related. They have smells, they have textures... Some of those things you can understand only when you page through them. The role of tactility. Each of them is, as Kitija already said, a part of Microhistory. We can easily live also without it, but it gives us kind of personal contact with the previous generations, just because it's so personal or private.

So we hope that people will just, from this abundance of those little artefacts or artworks, build up their own stories. We also try to put some little narrative structures. We have, for example, an On Kawara date painting with a particular date, and then are selecting diaries with people in Latvia which we want to open on the page of exactly the same date as On Kawara's painting and see what was going on here, starting. These diaries are different ones. There's a collective diary of a pantomime underground or semiunderground group here in Latvia. It could be just a weather diary a lady wrote for decades, where each day wrote down the temperature and whether it was sunny or it was raining. Or there's an artist's notebook with the same date. And on the other hand, we want to show that date, which... The day that is On Kawara's date, and then we have just a date on the same year somewhere in Germany. This is story of the relationship between the owner of a factory and his secretary, a private diary, which consists of photos, hotels bills where they stayed over the night... There are bills he paid for dinners. There are photos of what kind of dresses he bought for her, and he made photos of her posing in those dresses. You see the influence of soft porn magazines, which came from Sweden in the newsagents in Germany. They're documenting those diaries also with the pills. This is an age when affairs can't really go off because anti-pregnancy pills. At the same time she still gets pregnant and they have to do an abortion. In these diaries there are also this kind of pharmacy, this kind of packaging back from those days. So we tried to combine three different dates, you know? The

date in the painting by On Kawara, the dates in the diaries of ordinary men and women and a date between a man a woman somewhere in Germany. And somewhere in between, probably, the viewer will have to face questions: Where does art start? Where does it end? What role has art now in everyday life? Do we still want to call it art?

Kitija Vasiljeva: Sometimes when I think about this exhibition I think of a historian who walks into the archive and then, simply, in order to write the narrative, you have this series of facts that you have to connect yourself. So actually, I imagine a visitor who is visiting an archive but he's presented with a fact that he, himself, or she, herself, can connect in a larger narrative and build it up herself or himself.



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