



Old Media, Networks & Borders

You've Got 1243 Unread Messages at the Latvian Center for Contemporary Art

Lucie Kolb

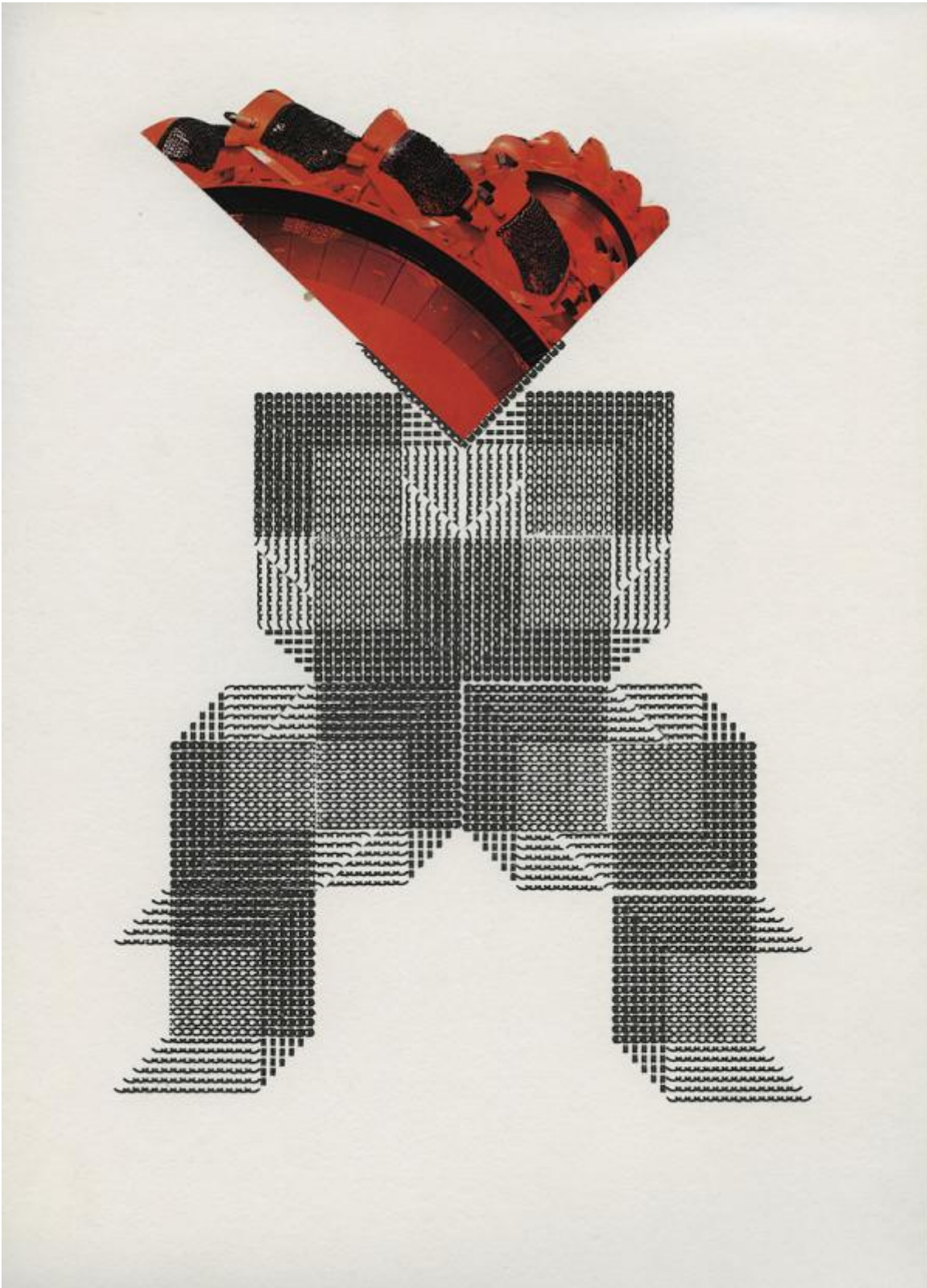
The show *You've Got 1243 Unread Messages* at the Latvian Center for Contemporary Art deals with media before the internet, their materiality and potential as well as their restraints. It outlines artistic, political and personal strategies with economic and political interests mirrored in the media.



Facebook recently ended its collaboration with British data company Cambridge Analytica, not least due to political pressure. For many years Cambridge Analytica has used (and saved) data regarding gender, sexual orientation, political views etc. of Facebook users for online-targeting. Among others, they worked for Donald Trump's presidential and the Pro-Brexit campaigns using an algorithm that not only predicts but also influences the way users vote. In 2016 many news outlets suggested that it was, in fact, their online-targeting that got Donald Trump elected. Against this backdrop, Congress in Washington has held several hearings not just with Facebook but also with companies such as Twitter and Google, asking about their strategies against being used as a political weapon.

The show *You've Got 1243 Unread Messages* demonstrates that the use of media has never come without conflict, friction, or battles. Media such as telephones, fax and printing have been used as weapons by economic and political players. The subtitle suggests that it's a show about people, about lives, about a generation, the last generation before the internet. In a way it is, but it also deals with several other generations whose communication was characterized by analog media or, more precisely, by a *Medienverbund* (multimedia), to borrow a term from Friedrich Kittler. It's a show about means of communication and about the ways in which people use those means in their daily lives. The show focuses on the everyday use of telephones, typewriters and cameras and on how these media can be used to disseminate artistic and/or political messages in a subversive way. The availability of those items, as they were affordable, opened up a possibility «to vary even the traditional genres of self-reflection and tools for constructing a social selfhood, including diaries, «memory books», pen-pal correspondence, family albums and other methods of personal archiving», as the show's curators, Kaspars Vanags, Zane Zajan?kauska and Diana Franssen, write in the press release.

The show looks very closely at the use of media by individuals, not just artists but also family members, lovers, police officers. It links artworks to people's personal items such as photo albums, memory books and surveillance documentation made by the police. It's a show about communication before the internet. It's a show that looks at the means of communication and their materiality. Rather than limiting itself to a technical understanding of communication media, it focuses on specific social and political contexts that define their usage and on the potential of media to create alternative publics in the realm of one-way state-controlled communication. Xerox copying machines, for example, were hardly available to members of the Mail Art scene in the former Eastern bloc states.



Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, *Cagy Being I*, 1980

One body of work in the exhibition seemed particularly striking: the typewriter-based visual poetry Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt. In pieces such as *Cagy Being I* (1980) and *Concrete Architecture «Dead End»* (1975) she works with space, repetition and punctuation. She participated in the Mail Art scene that emerged in the US in the 1950s and evolved into an internationally connected movement in the 1970s and 1980s. By the time she produced her works (1972–81), Wolf-Rehfeldt was living in East Berlin, that is, behind the «Iron Curtain». The channels of

communication between the «East» and «West» were subject to heavy surveillance. Since the letters Wolf-Rehfeld sent weren't legible for the censors, they slipped through censorship. They operated on a different level, that of subversive humor and irony. The letters in *Cagy Being I*, for example, formed a pattern symbolizing the restrictions on movement and the artist's desire to overcome them. What is particularly interesting is that the artist's output came to a halt after 1989, when the Iron Curtain disintegrated and Germany was eventually reunited. There was simply no need for it anymore. Once the semi-permeable channels were open for Wolf-Rehfeld there was no need to continue her activities in the field of Mail Art. For me this was a wonderful discovery and a trenchant stance in the context of Mail Art, which was all about networking and getting in touch, opening up a new world. Wolf-Rehfeld's work points to the prerequisite of postal service as a channel of communication and strategies to resist attempts to control it. Looking at the Mail Art movement today, it is striking how much it resembles the images that were transported in the early days of the internet when it was seen as a tool to overcome one-way communication and create a truly democratic public.



Transponans, Issue 36, 1987

Another astonishing discovery was the self-published magazine *Transponans* (1979–89) which was published by Ry Nikonova and Serge Segay in the town of Yeysk, in Southern Russia. The couple used the technique of carbon copy to reproduce and multiply poems and summaries of banned works of literature. The magazine is visually stunning, with each page being individually designed and pages having different sizes and shapes. Nikonova and Segay used both a typewriter and hand writing. The magazine is an example of how underground

publications circulating in a relatively controlled environment function as a safe space for otherwise censored content. It shows the effectiveness of underground networks in areas where censorship is proactive. At the same time it points to the connections between political and aesthetic opposition.



You've Got 1243 Unread Messages, 2017, exhibition view. Photo: Lucie Kolb, Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2017.

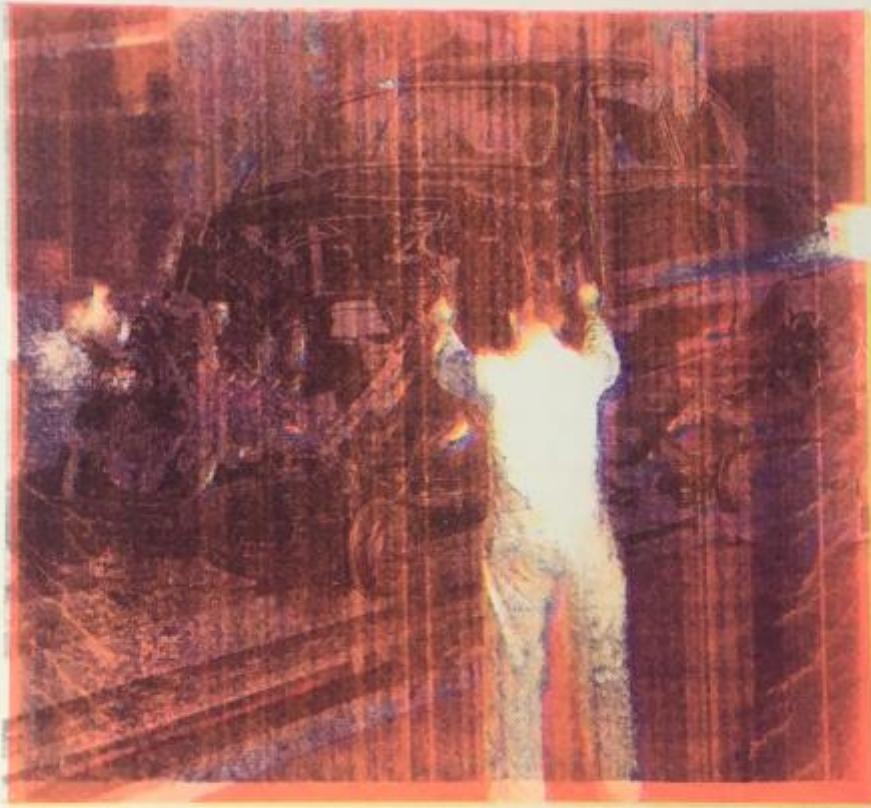


Surveillance photographs taken by the communist secret police in Czechoslovakia, 1970s-1980s. Courtesy the Institute of Totalitarian Regimes, Prague, CZ. Photo: Lucie Kolb, Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2017.

The main exhibition hall includes a black box featuring a movie by William Kentridge, which also serves as an additional floor from which to survey the entire exhibition space, the entrance and the exit. The role and function of the observer is also mirrored in the documents displayed on top of the black box. They consist of a series of surveillance photographs taken by the communist secret police in Czechoslovakia in the 1980s. Alena Hrmoadkova, for example, was followed because she was a translator of enemy materials and had many contacts abroad. The philosopher Zsenek Neubaer was under observation because of contacts to dissident groups such as «Charter 77». The photographs were taken with hidden cameras with the aim of identifying people they met and reconstructing networks of thought and action considered a threat. Nowadays those photos provide the most complete documentation of everyday life during the «normalization» period of socialist Czechoslovakia.



Xavier Antin, *Just in Time, or A Short History of Production*, 2016. Photo: Andrejs Strokins. Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2017.



Xavier Antin, *Just in Time, or A Short History of Production*, 2016. Photo: Lucie Kolb, Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art, 2017.

Another line of interest in the exhibition is – against the backdrop of an alleged «dematerialization» of media in the process of digitization – the materiality of media and the ways in which it affects their use. The show includes several works by the French artist Xavier Antin. In *Just in Time or a Short History of Production* (2010) he presents an installation of four printing devices from 1880–1976. The different devices are arranged one behind the other, suggesting a chronology of industrial revolution. Placed on a pedestal, they become one body, a new device embodying present and past technology. The installation includes some wall-mounted CMYK prints produced with each of these printers. Magenta is printed using a stencil duplicator, a tool typical of the industrial revolution when production was conceived in a way that even uneducated workers could handle the various steps it involved. Cyan is printed using a spirit duplicator, a technique that was popular for church and school printouts as well as communist pamphlets. Black is printed using a laser printer, a digital improvement Xerox issued in 1969. And yellow is printed using inkjet technology which was introduced in 1976. In this way Antin creates a precise image of the state of contemporary media. New media builds on old media. At the same time, we're not only confronted with a history of inventions, but also with one of social practices, both of which are mirrored in the copying machines as well as in those who produce them.



Miroslav Tichý, Untitled, s.a., Courtesy Delmes & Zander Cologne.

I can't sketch a way out of the mess we're facing as a result of feeding an apparatus with the connections we make with other people and the things and thoughts we want to develop further. As a whole, the works shown in *You've Got 1243 Unread Messages* punctuate the basic fact that media cannot be understood simply as an extension of our eyes and ears: we do not simply use media but are, as fundamentally social beings, in fact defined by them. While

sounding quite catchy, the title of the show is misleading, as it's not less about the lives of the last generation before the internet and more about how our way of thinking cannot be separated from our media environment. This is exemplified by one work in the show. Miroslav Tichý, a photographer from the Czech Republic, started to deconstruct his very instrument, the camera. He cut his lenses from Plexiglas and even devised his own telephoto lenses. In doing so, he rendered the camera's technical aspects, its eye visible. The photos he shot with his handmade lenses are full of flaws, fussy, etc. I'd like to think we can learn from that: let's disassemble our media and reassemble them again. Let's see which rules are fixed and which ones are just habits, dictated by the state, companies, industrial standards, laziness. Let's think about the framework we communicate in, about how we operate within it, how we are moved by it. This show offers us artistic tools which can be adapted for our world today, for dealing with networks that are predicated as much on technical as on political and social conditions.

You've Got 1243 Unread Messages

8 December 2017 - 4 February 2018

Organized by the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art at the Latvian National Museum of Art, 1 Janis Rozentņls Square, Riga

LUCIE KOLB

Lucie Kolb is co-editor of Brand-New-Life and senior researcher at the Basel Academy of Art and Design.

Lucie Kolb ist Mitherausgeberin von Brand-New-Life und Senior Researcher an der Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst Basel.

© Brand-New-Life, 2018