

15 YOU'VE GOT 1243 UNREAD MESSAGES. The Last Generation Before the Internet. Their Lives

Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga
By Andris Brinkmanis

The recently restored and enlarged building of the Latvian National Museum of Art in Riga hosted one of the most original curatorial proposals of this spring season – the exhibition “YOU'VE GOT 1243 UNREAD MESSAGES. The Last Generation Before the Internet. Their Lives,” curated by Kaspars Vanags, Zane Zajančauska, and Diana Franssen, with a display structure designed by Rihards Funts.

Almost as if departing from Walter Benjamin's thesis that “history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now,” this exhibition rendered the paradigmatic change from the analog (modern) to the digital world its point of departure. Focusing on pre-internet-era tactility and radically different perceptions of time and space, the artworks in the show were exhibited alongside vernacular objects and artifacts that attested to surprising forms of quotidian creativity: from private pen-pal letters to mail art, from amateur radio experiments to pioneering sound art practices, from diaries to samizdat magazines, from secret-service image archives to voyeuristic amateur photographs.

All these materials coherently coinhabited the exhibition space, revealing complex social networks and histories of the pre-internet era, and how forms of expression and exchange of the 1970s and 80s were largely determined (but also subverted) by available media tools and sociopolitical contexts. Rather than merely showing archives, this exhibition focused on a multitude of unarchivable experiences in which any clear-cut border between art and everyday life was deliberately blurred.

Among the many objects on show, a compelling example of the above is a book designed by Alexander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova in 1934 to celebrate a decade of Soviet rule in Uzbekistan. A few years after publication, during Stalin's purges, several of the party officials portrayed in the volume were removed from the office or executed. Rodchenko defaced his copy of the book, obliterating the portraits with thick black india ink. Similarly, all issues of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* available in public libraries were “updated” on a regular basis.

A project by Latvian artist Andrejs Stokins used a randomly acquired old photo archive of a Moskvich car

whose license plate's first three letters comically form the word “LAV” (pronounced like the English word “love”). This strikingly simple work discloses all the suspended potentiality that even the most everyday gestures implicitly carry – to be rediscovered by generations to come.

16 FRANCIS ALÿS
Knots n' Dust

Beirut Art Centre, Beirut
By Agnieszka Gratza

Paradoxes are knotty statements that fold back on themselves, as in “Sometimes winning is losing / Sometimes losing is winning.” Finger written by the artist on a windshield, following a sandstorm that covered Beirut in a film of dust, these words appear as bilingual (English and Arabic) captions in one of four postcards commissioned for Francis Alÿs's first solo show in this war-torn region. The sepia-colored photographs from which the cards are made recall *Tornado* (2000–10), a half-hour video that captures the artist's repeated attempts to penetrate “dust devils.” In conversation with Beirut Art Center director Marie Muracciole at the opening, Alÿs likened the experience to being inside a monochromatic James Turrell installation.

At its core, “Knots n' Dust” associates two disparate images and actions bound together by a spiral motion that informs the show as a whole. The lone man pitted against the whirling mass of the tornado has his counterpart in a female figure ceaselessly doing and undoing a knot in her hair. This intimate gesture is captured in a vast body of animation drawings that make up *Exodus 3:14* (2014–18). To reach the animation proper, projected onto a matching paper support amid the 640-odd drawings on view (roughly half their total number), visitors must walk around them, performing a spiraling movement with their bodies.

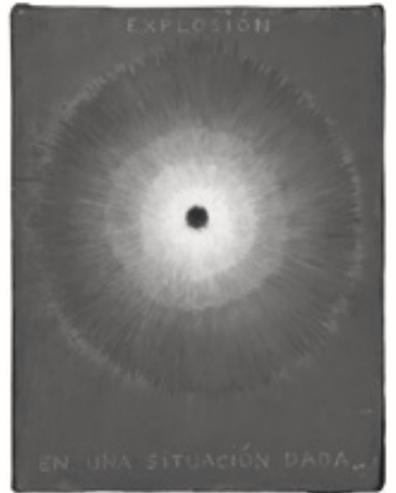
Placed next to *Exodus 3:14, Untitled (The Liar, The Copy of the Liar)* (1994–95), an earlier work in which Alÿs explored the convoluted nature of gender and sexual identity, invites a similar reading of the new animation piece. Indeed, its mostly female protagonist has male hands, just as a contralto tenor sings the haunting lyrics of the looping soundtrack: “I am that I am” – yet another paradoxical formulation, this time drawn from the Bible. Fittingly, the biblical passage in question (whose exact reference happens to tally with the irrational number π) relates how God in the guise of a burning bush bids Moses to lead the Hebrews into Canaan, the promised land that lies in the Levant.

15 “You've got 1243 Unread Messages. The Last Generation Before the Internet. Their Lives,” installation view at Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga, 2018. Photography by Andrejs Stokins. Courtesy of Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga.
16 Francis Alÿs, *Explosion*, 2009. Oil on canvas on wood. 20.8x14.4x2cm. Courtesy of the artist and Beirut Art Centre, Beirut.

- 17 Mithu Sen, *UnMYthU*, installation view at Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai, 2017-18. Courtesy of the artist and Chemould Prescott Road, Mumbai.
- 18 Nancy Lupo, *Baleenciaga*, 2018. 2-10 gallon Rubbermaid Brute containers, Balenciaga dresses, chop frills, rainbow thread, cotton balls, plaster. 49.5x44.5x45cm. Courtesy of the artist and Antenna Space, Shanghai.



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