EPHEMERAL_ETERNAL

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Ventura Lambrate
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Prof. Jan Kastner's master woodcarving studio,
Czech World I, 1904–1905



UMPRUM

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Text and concept © Lada Hubatová-Vacková
Photos © Karolína Ketmanová, Ondřej Přibyl, Kristýna Trpáková
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The Imperial Royal School of Decorative Arts in Prague (C.k. Umělecko-průmyslová škola, or UMPRUM) has enjoyed a long tradition of excellence as one of Europe's leading art schools. Founded in 1885 in direct response to the first model schools for the decorative arts established in the mid-19th century, the school followed the educational structure and curriculum of the Imperial Royal School for Art and Industry in Vienna, the first school of its type to be established on the continent. Compared to the fine art academies of the time, UMPRUM came to represent a modern, reformist alternative. UMPRUM's ethos has always been for art to approximate real life, made tangible by the things that are dear to people in the form of useful objects and household equipment. UMPRUM students are taught that art



should penetrate through the decorative facades of buildings, shape the electric streetlights, the trams and the railway carriages.

In the fields of design and architecture, expert artists working with wood, metal, textile, glass, ceramic and porcelain have begun their professional careers at UMPRUM. The school has also provided a formative background for future academics and typographers. At UMPRUM we aspire for art to be embodied in jewellery, fancy walking sticks, embroidered handbags, cabinets, doorknobs and handrails. Students are taught the eternal rules of beauty exemplified by these old plaster models, but are also made aware of the ephemeral trends of contemporary fashion.

Archival magazine photos from 1904 provide a glimpse into the school's decorative modelling and carving studios where students in long white



smocks under the leadership of their studio masters humbly copy ancient models. Since then the school has assembled an extensive collection of plaster casts representing works from ancient, medieval and Renaissance art, including collections of decorative architectural capitals and friezes as well as anatomical models of human hands, legs and torsos.

These old plaster models, which belong to the timeless aesthetic canon and form part of the school's identity, provide the context for UMPRUM's current exhibition at Salone del Mobile 2017 in Milan. The theme of this exhibition is the semantic counterpoint between various approaches to time – ephemeral or eternal, mobile or stable, fast or last, instantaneous or durable – by charting the temporality of objects and images.[1]

While at the time of UMPRUM's founding the industrial age had only



just established itself, requiring the creation of new items suitable for mass production, in the current post-industrial context of Central Europe we are now faced with the abundance and accumulation of objects, as perpetuated by the short-lived, fleeting consumerism of the fashion world. Criticism of the habits and practices of modern consumerist societies in a Czech context was formulated as early as 1947 by Bohuslav Brouk in his book People and Things.[2] Foreshadowing the much-cited French sociologists Jean Baudrillard and Gilles Lipovetsky, Brouk writes of society's "destructive, foolish, hypertrophied attachment to things, about unnecessary decorative junk, part-junk, rubbish, ugly products made of cheap new materials" and of its pathological, "constant hunt and desire for fleeting newness". Although Brouk (a notable surrealist poet, sociologist and psychoanalyst) was lenient towards



necessary, durable, high-quality objects, he believed in urging society towards asceticism and the rationalisation of consumption.[3]

This exhibition is not supposed to be a bold anti-consumerist proclamation. Based on an applied arts profile of the institution, such a statement would necessarily seem hypocritical. Rather, the exhibition should serve as a starting point for highlighting examples of work that internally problematise complex issues relating to the ephemeral and eternal existence of things.

The exhibition consists of a selection of three original collections by UMPRUM students/graduates in the fields of product design, fashion design and photography. Video by Vendula Radostová, performance and installation by Lenka Vacková, daguerreotypes by Ondřej Přibyl.

1 For an ideological outline of the thematisation of temporality in relation to the objective world, see Lada Hubatová-Vacková, Pavla Pauknerová, Cyril Říha (eds.), There and Back. Contemporary Design, Architecture and Urbanism, Prague, 2015.

2 Bohuslav Brouk, People and Things, Prague, 1947.

3 Bohuslav Brouk, The Rationalisation of Consumption, Prague, 1946.





Vendula Radostová
Entropy of Items from
The Royal Dux Factory, 2015

Video
(Video by Kristýna Trpáková,
Music by Arvo Pärt)

This video is the result of a bachelor's project by Vendula Radostová of the Ceramics and Porcelain Studio from 2015. The student describes her work: "My project deals with decomposition, decay, impermanence, time, coincidence, destruction, the end of old forms and the search for the new."

The word 'entropy' is a largely abstract, scientific term first codified in the 19th century by the field of thermodynamics. The entropy law presumes the necessary extinction of energy in a given system and the dissolution of an organised structure into a state of disorder. As an image of inexorable termination and gradual transformation into ruin





the term was notably used by land artist Robert Smithson, to whom Radostová refers in her cataloguing of the slow demise of Royal Dux's old porcelain factory.

Radostová looks at the material of porcelain, providing an overview of the history and qualities of the material and shedding light on traditional local production. Only discovered in Asia in the 18th century, porcelain is a relatively modern material in a European context. Historically, the expansion of porcelain and ceramics factories was largely dependent on the locations of kaolin clay deposits. Among other regions, Northern Bohemia in the former Austrian-Hungarian Empire proved rich in such deposits and thus became a prime site for the development of porcelain factories.

In 1853, a factory was founded in the Northern Bohemian town of Duchcov. With a team of experienced modellers working with quality materials, it began





to produce luxury porcelain, majolica and faience goods. Following several awards at international exhibitions (Paris 1878, St. Louis 1904) it began operations under the trademark Royal Dux Bohemia in 1900. In its heyday, the famous porcelain factory employed around five hundred craftsmen. However, its majority-German population left the "Sudeten" town after the Second World War, leading to a gradual decrease in production. The once-thriving factory now has just seventeen employees.

Radostová chose to rework the traditional range of porcelain products made at the factory into a sculptural group under the title Afternoon Tea. Pandering nostalgically and not unsentimentally to the Rococo style, we are presented with a seemingly idyllic image of salon society. But it is in fact Radostová's treatment of what is constituted by demise and transience.





First, porcelain in the form of liquid sludge was poured into plaster casts. After capturing and removing the casts, individual parts were glued together before retouching. Using this technique the sculptural group was assembled by hand from sixty tiny parts. This painstakingly composed, unfired sculpture was then submerged into an aquarium filled with water. The video records in dramatic fashion how the salon idyll gradually disintegrates, becomes cloudy and dissolves over time.

What do we see? The disintegration of a painstakingly assembled sculpture? The disappearance of a traditional handicraft from a once-renowned factory? Are we witness to the deterioration and eventual ruination of bygone social mores, rituals and etiquette? Or does the video represent a transformation of the old world into the new, the contours of images lost in the fog?





Vendula Radostová (b. 1992) is a student at UMPRUM's Ceramics and Porcelain Studio under the supervision of Maxim Velčovský. As well as completing an internship in ceramics and glass at the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia, she has participated in numerous group exhibitions in the Czech Republic and abroad (Contemporary Ceramic Art – South Korea, London Design Festival). She was the recipient of UMPRUM's Rector Award in 2015.



Lenka Vacková
Fast or Last, 2016–2017

Performance and installation

Lenka Vacková is currently in her final year of study. Although her original intention was to study painting, she switched to applied fashion design. From the very beginning, her approach has been highly specific, both in its conceptual objective and critical awareness. Vacková gradually withdrew from the short-lived transience of trend fashion to focus increasingly on the areas of sustainable fashion, material recycling and criticism of the large-scale fashion industry.

At Salone del Mobile 2017 in Milan, Vacková presents her own original performance and object exhibition – both named Fast or Last. Both projects rail



against fast fashion, sweatshops, consumerism and indifference. Vacková speaks about her work: “In the pursuit of the latest trends we spend money on short-lived items with zero value. But someone else pays a heavy price to produce these items for us, sometimes with their own blood. They are often workers from poor backgrounds or people from developing countries, such as Bangladesh. They live on the brink of poverty and work under substandard conditions for anything up to 18 hours a day, including children. They use technologies that destroy their health and which are consequently also harmful to us as consumers, to our planet and the environment.”

Vacková’s exhibition is a protest against this situation. In the form of a screened performance, her body is tattooed with the logos of famous brands. Instead of a standard



long-lasting tattoo ink pigment, a tattoo artist uses Vacková's own blood. Disappearing in about a month, the blood tattoo logos gradually lighten, heal and eventually become invisible. Blood is used as an expression of dissent against the fact that someone else pays for our vanity with their own blood.

The surface of the upper body, the area for the painful tattoo, is dressed in a t-shirt composed of the logos of multinational companies as a representation of ever-increasing consumerism. Vacková says: "T-shirts and clothes are our second skin. But they should protect us and not hurt anyone. How long does a trend last? The traces of the blood tattoo take just as long to disappear as a fleeting trend does."

Vacková's installation is composed of a number of identical white shirts hung on a sales rack. The focus is not on each single shirt but on the quantity of



shirts produced. Sewn into a monolithic plastic unit, they highlight the absurdity of our obsession with accumulating things. The installation assumes a style reminiscent of a store window, providing a unique way of connecting the hyper-prosaic arrangement of a store with a criticism of consumerist oblivion. Here, conceptual and pop-art backgrounds meet at the juncture of contemporary fashion. Both projects are complemented by monograms and the neon logo L&V, the visual style of which imitates and simultaneously subverts the styles used by fashion chains.



Lenka Vacková (b. 1991) studies at UMPRUM's Fashion and Footwear Design Studio under the leadership of Liběna Rochová. She began at UMPRUM's Painting Studio under the leadership of Jiří Černický and two years later moved to fashion design. She completed an internship in fashion design at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen and regularly presents solo exhibitions (Designblok, Prague) and joint fashion shows (Bunka Fashion Week, Tokyo, Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Central Europe, Budapest and others).



Ondřej Přibyl
Selected Collections:
The Signs of Causality (2011)
Children (2012)
The Mechanical Viewer (2014)
Ephemeral_Eternal (2017)

Daguerreotype

This exhibition in Milan extends to include the work of Ondřej Přibyl and his appropriation of the daguerreotype in a modern context.

The unique photographic technique first developed by L.J.M. Daguerre was one of the first photographic reproduction processes to produce a unique, non-multiplicative image recorded on a silver sheet. It was launched publicly in 1839 with the French government spectacularly declaring it a “freely usable gift to the world”. By the first half of the 19th century, Daguerre’s photographic method had already spread throughout the Habsburg Empire, including the Czech lands.



Přibyl became fascinated with the qualities that this historic technique offers: the surprising sharpness of image, the soft photographic lineation and the unique "objectivity" of the metal sheets. In today's era of instant digital "clickers" he admires the contrasting demands of the daguerreotype, the unpredictability of the final image produced on a photosensitive sheet following a lengthy exposure, and the subsequent chemical--alchemical process. The resulting daguerreotype image becomes the only evidence of the photographed object at a particular time, a visual record and confirmation of the event. Here there is no post-production retouching; the image delivered is always a true and uncompromising print of a certain moment in time. In this context, the daguerreotype becomes a "relic-remnant". Přibyl talks about forming a relationship to the "objectivity" of the sheet, its uniqueness.



The impression of the past existence of the photographed object reveals the character of the daguerreotype and the "remains of fluid appearance". That is why these daguerreotypes are precisely adjusted and inserted into deep, yet modest frames that vaguely resemble closed cases.

With regard to image, Přibyl strays from traditional Victorian iconography and its subconscious association with the daguerreotype. He has tested a wide variety of motifs including those that may seem to oppose this most venerated of photographic techniques.

For this exhibition in Milan, twenty--eight daguerreotypes have been chosen from four sets. Ephemeral_Eternal consists of eight sheets, which take as their theme an incineration plant in Malešice, Prague. The sheets show an industrial building, which represents the destruction and transformation of general waste.





Through the daguerreotype image, a rationally conceived construction in the form of an extremely long chimney changes into a memento of the impermanence of things. The demands of the photographic technique are a necessary part of the overall work and its ambition to make the incinerator building sacred.

Přibyl shows the extremes of how we perceive time passing – from the ephemeral to the eternal – through various daguerreotypes of children, plants, landscapes and modern ruins. The most tensely observed contradictions are revealed in the daguerreotype of the cast of a child's face (or is it a death mask?), where the imprint multiples and at the same time recedes from the original model. Although the transient features of the child are immortalised twice here, it makes us feel the child's absence all the more keenly.



Ondřej Přibyl (b. 1978) studied at UMPRUM's Photography Studio under the leadership of Pavel Štecha and Ivan Pinkava. He completed an internship at the Berlin University of Arts in graphic design and visual communications. In 2012, he graduated from UMPRUM with a doctor's degree. His final thesis explored the possibilities of appropriating the photographic technique of daguerreotype in a modern context. He is a member of the artist collective kunstWerk and has presented numerous solo and group exhibitions in the Czech Republic and abroad (Alte Schule Berlin, Center for Alternative Photography New York, Photo Month in Krakow). His work mainly deals with auteur and product photography and he has a special interest in unique photographic methods (photogram, daguerreotype).

Prof. Celda Klouček's master modelling studio,
Czech World I, 1904–1905



Curator:
Lada Hubatová-Vacková

Architect:
Jiří Pelcl

Production:
Michaela Kaplánková
Barbora Zavadská

Text and concept:
Lada Hubatová-Vacková

Translation/proofreading:
Michael and Žofie FitzGerald

Photos:
Karolína Ketmanová
Ondřej Přibyl
Kristýna Trpáková

Graphic design and typesetting:
Anežka Hrubá Ciglerová

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