

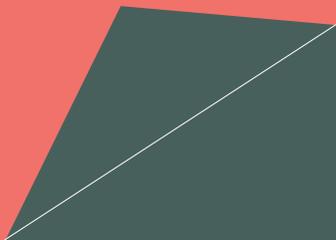
Leading up to an exhibition the artist engages in conversation with a previously unknown correspondent.

The conversation aims to get an insight on how the initial ideas for the project develop, to paint a picture of the otherwise untraceable choices in the artist's process, practice and the making of this exhibition.

Janek Simon
in conversation
with
Florian Weigl
As part of the
exhibition
META
FOLKLORE

1646.nl

1646



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META FOLKLORE

Sculptures

- 1 *Meta Folklore v0.9*
- 2 *Meta Folklore v0.2*
- 3 *Meta Folklore v0.1*
- 4 *Meta Folklore v0.4*
- 5 *Meta Folklore v0.8*
- 6 *Meta Folklore v0.7*
- 7 *Meta Folklore v0.3*
- 8 *Meta Folklore v0.5*
- 9 *Meta Folklore v0.6*

2022

FDM 3D print
Polylactic acid (PLA)
and other plastics

Meta Folklore
Video installation
2022
10 mins loop
1080p

For more information about this and other projects,
check our website or scan the QR-code.

1646.nl



Janek Simon

Janek Simon (b. 1977) is a conceptual artist and an occasional curator based in Warsaw. The main motivation behind his work is curiosity. On a more concrete level he is inspired by travel, history of science and political ideas, and the practice and ethics of the DIY culture, always filtering the theories through his personal experience though. In recent years Simon developed a body of work investigating notions of distance and difference between places, working on projects that try to remap the semi-peripheral position of Eastern Europe through geographical experiments. Simon's works were shown, amongst others, at Manifesta 7, Liverpool Biennale, Prague Biennale, and numerous individual exhibitions in major public art institutions in Poland and elsewhere (Arnolfini Bristol, Casino Luxembourg, Zacheta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, CSW Zamek Ujazdowski and others).

Florian Weigl

Florian Weigl (1985) is a curator and researcher based in Amsterdam. His interests are in art and contemporary technology, in collaboration with artists in the development of critical dialogue, artistic reflection and practice-oriented research. Since 2015 he works as curator at V2_, Lab for the Unstable Media (Rotterdam, the Netherlands) where, besides curating various exhibitions, he initiated spaces for experimentation and development. Alongside his work at V2_, Florian works as independent curator, researcher and advisor.

Feb 3, 2022, 5:33 PM

From: Florian

Hi Janek,

I briefly browsed through your body of work, online and in the catalogue sent to me in .pdf

But before getting to know you through this - and for sure before bombarding you with a long list of questions in the first email.

First of all - hello.

This first online scroll got me curious - about you, your work. And also your relation to your work in public space, the gallery and the game environment. This always excites me. Creating an alternate world. Or one that's very relatable, maybe even similar to ours.

I'm also interested in what you're working on now, especially what you're planning to present at 1646.

Hope I don't steer the conversation right away and very much looking forward to your reply,

Florian

Mon, Feb 7, 1:17 PM

From: Janek

Dear Florian,

First of all - hello and great to meet you. I'm also really grateful that you agreed to participate in our process.

My practice is quite diverse and it might be difficult to get a grasp of what it is about at the first look. If I had to introduce it in one sentence then I would say that areas that interest me are 'cultural geography' (i.e. questions about difference between places, about relations and distances between them), DIY technology, and the intersection of the two.

I sometimes think that my future practice has been projected by the first piece that I showed in the contemporary art context, titled *Carpet Invaders* from 2002.

When it comes to what I'm working on now - it's basically two things. One is an ongoing research on how personal computers entered everyday life in communist Poland in the 80's. It's interesting from many angles - the economy behind it was complex (a mix of official and black-market channels), the way that computers were ideologised by the communist party is surprising at moments, there is plenty of interesting visual materials (magazines, stuff in TV archives etc). I've been working on it for a while and hope to extend the research to a broader scope of Eastern Europe in general at some point.

The other project - which will be shown in 1646 - is a series of 3D printed sculptures based on images generated by a GAN (A Generative Adversarial Network is a class of machine learning frameworks)

trained on a collection of photographs of 'traditional' 'folk' sculptures from around the world. I'm trying to create a kind of 'universal' folklore here. Folklore that doesn't denote any particular geographical location.

All the best,

Janek

Wed, Feb 9, 1:09 AM

From: Florian

Hi Janek,

Hope this message finds you well. I share your enthusiasm about our e-meet, the process we dove into with this email-conversation and was pleasantly surprised by your elaborate email. In your message you did a great job in unpacking both your practice as your plans for your upcoming exhibition.

Some aspects of your mail got me curious which could be a good point to continue our exchange. Starting with the one-sentence about your areas of interest, which I imagine works as a great conversation starter. You mention the intersection of cultural geography and do-it-yourself technology. What in particular do you find on this crossroad?

And what would you care to explore there?

To unpack it even further for our readers, how would you define this cultural geography?

I could easily read it as a way to analyse unknown places, relationships and connections. Do you recognise your approach in this translation, or is yours different?

I would also be interested in unwrapping the term do-it-yourself technology and what it means to you. Although the term focuses on doing it yourself the scene around it is usually one of a tight active community. Another way of looking at it is doing it by oneself without professionals or certified experts involved. Within an art practice this could mean finding connection with an active community,

finding a new form of autodidactic learning but also focusing on working with widely available consumer electronics or even making re-use an important aspect of the development. Which would you relate to and how do you see this?

It would be great to dive into the project you're presenting at 1646. And since the project has so many different elements I'm eager to talk about I just write all of my thoughts down. Feel free to elaborate as much as you find interesting and ignore remarks you don't care for at all. Coming from my curatorial spot at V2_ I'm usually involved in a lot of the development of new works which makes me used to deep-dive along into concept, theory and technology but it might not be needed here.

By reading how you describe your project it's quite clear you know your way around GAN, the technical requirements and possibilities.

How did you come across this technique, when did you decide to understand more deeply how it works and what's exactly going on? Did you find it a valuable opportunity in the hybrid search for 'universal folklore' figures?

GAN gives you the possibility to create images that are 100% artificially created. Is this the aim? Or do you also want to play with versions from 0% to semi- to (almost or) 100% artificial?

The dataset is carefully created, could you elaborate a little on how this came about,

what could be potential blind spots and what the role of the database - and the archive you're currently working from - will be throughout the project.

You're building the 3D printer specifically to create the sculptures in the show. Yet you don't print them at the venue but ship them. Did this come from a practical point of view?

Or did you think that after shipping the printer, new obtained insights in the process would give you the urge to completely start from scratch?

What kind of material will you be printing with?

At one point I would love to learn more about your ongoing project around personal computers within everyday life in Poland in the 80's. If we're, for example, talking about it in comparison to the various DIY moments - did you find something about handling these devices? Did they also go for homemade repairs or even upgrades? Or was it more a sacred device of modern technology that you yourself wouldn't mess with?

In the coming days I will read your catalogue and artist interview I got fwd-ed, so will see if this answers questions I still had or if more will pop up.

Looking forward to hear from you,

All my best,

Florian

Wed, Feb 16, 1:26 PM

From: Janek

Hey Florian,

Thanks for the questions ! I really enjoyed thinking about the answers, it's a longish read and I probably incorporated more details from my personal life and digressions than needed but we can edit it out if needed in the final version ;)

Let me start from the easier side, which is unpacking 'DIY Technology' and Cultural Geography. I hope this will make defining the intersection easier. The 'one sentence description of my practice' was more of a metaphor for me but let's see where delving deeper into it will take us.

Let me start with DIY technology. I have to say that I will probably tick most of the boxes from your list ;). First of all - I'm a 99% autodidact - I studied psychology (specializing in cognitive science) and sociology but I finished neither. I never studied art or anything like that. I learnt most of the skills that I use in my practice by myself. When I started showing my work in the contemporary art context I was using tools that I learnt doing VJ'ing (mixing visuals for rave parties) and coding websites which was what I did for living in my later university years and just after. So I would use software like Macromedia Flash or Macromedia Director to create those kinds of computer-based interactive works like *Carpet Invaders* which I already mentioned in one of my previous emails. I started making more physical objects like simple robots or works using chemistry or homemade explosives and that kind of stuff later. I realised that even if my practice is not directly related or presented on the internet it's actually 100% dependent on it as I would never be

able to learn all those skills without it. I made a piece that reflected on it in 2005. It was called *Homemade Electronic Watch* and was an experiment on acquiring knowledge from the internet. I decided to learn electronics to the level that would allow me to build a working electronic hand watch from scratch. An electronic watch had been a dream object of children growing up in the economic crisis ridden communist Poland of the 1980's and then I was able to build one by myself. So DIY technology can be something that brings that kind of - you can probably even say existential - empowerment.

Growing up in Poland in the 80's brought something that defined my anarchist-leaning political position - a deep distrust toward the state and its institutions. Communism in Poland had its ups and downs but the 1980's was the time of its utter failure on all levels - morally, politically and economically. Nobody believed in this system anymore and it was clearly dysfunctional on an economical level. People had to take care of themselves which resulted in the emergence of different kinds of informal economies - the 8-bit computer scene I'm researching currently is one of them. The 90's brought optimism and a kind of liberal enthusiasm - we have to work hard now but everything is possible. But the state was still weak. I got involved in the underground rave subculture at that time, first just going to parties then doing videos and helping to organise them. That was a defining, powerful political experience. We could build a space where people felt connected and happy without giving any care about the hierarchies of mainstream society. Reading things like *Mondo 2000* (a magazine published in San Francisco that linked technology to psychedelic drugs and electronic music) was inspiring for me at that time.

DIY has countercultural roots for me. It allows us to create kind of 'parallel' spaces, spaces which work according to different rules than the society around us. Some of my activities started from that way of thinking - like *Goldex Poldex* which was an art space I co-ran with friends in Krakow between 2008 and 2012. The main idea behind it was to experiment with funding strategies. What we thought was that you can try to sell objects to rich people or apply for government grants but you can also do other things, like play online poker or smuggle cigarettes to Berlin, sell them there and produce a show with profits. We managed to organize more than 100 events in 4 years that way. Another project I can mention here is *Szalona Galeria*: a 100% crowdfunded mobile gallery that travelled around small towns and villages in Poland in the summer of 2016. I worked with two good friends on it - artist Agnieszka Polska and graphic designer Kuba de Barbaro. We were showing works of more than 30 leading Polish contemporary artists to people that usually had no contact with art before. The main line behind the selection of works was the idea of art being a space where 'things can be done differently': Showing this to people has enormous political meaning to me.

Another thing that I would like to mention here is the internet open hardware scene which I've been following for a long time. I built my first 3D printer: Rep Rap Mendel, an invention of British engineer Adrian Bowyer, in 2011. The idea behind that design was to make the printer as self-replicable as possible. So you could print parts for another printer on it. I loved the idea of a distributed factory, of the empowerment that comes with the ability of creating physical objects on your desk. At the beginning these printers were very unreliable and you

ended up spending more time solving problems than actually printing but I managed to print the first series of my 3D printed sculptures on it. That series is actually an example of what the intersection of DIY tech and cultural geography could be.

I was a 'curatorial advisor' (whatever that means) on one of the shows in the National Gallery here in Warsaw that dealt with travels of Polish artists during Stalinism, just after World War II. It was very difficult to leave the country at that time, so if someone managed to get to, for example, Paris and bring some gossip or catalogues back to Poland it was an important event for the artscene here. The show tried to map these travels through analysis of the artist's archives. What struck me, and actually inspired me to make my own work, was the repeated praise the Musée de l'Homme (the anthropological museum) got from different artists visiting Paris. The fusion of modern art and anthropology (like the French magazine Documents or events like Expedition Dakar - Djibouti) never happened here in Poland so maybe that was why that anthropological collection was so inspiring for artists.

I modeled and then printed 3D sculptures based on drawings from a sketchbook of Oskar Hansen from his visits there. Coming back to 3D printers: utopian ideas of Adrian Bowyer (self-replication and easy sourcing of parts as design goals, sacrificing ease of use, reliability and print quality) were replaced by pragmatism of Czech inventor Joseph Prusa who started selling 3D printer kits that were easy to assemble, relatively cheap, hassle free and produced good quality prints from a wide range of materials. That put an end to the first era of DIY 3D printing which was characterised by constant tweaking and

many many failed prints. I see some kind of beauty in the FDM technology (Fused Deposition Modeling is a technology that enables the construction of three-dimensional objects through a computer-aided process) It is connected to weaving to me but also to the work of a Polish conceptual artist Wacław Szpakowski who was obsessed with lines filling planes in different ways. In the case of FDM the line is actually filling a space to build a 3D object. Part of my artistic process is experimentation with this technology, with different materials and ways to print them. That's why it's important to me to print my works on my own printers and build them. I use PLA (polylactic acid) to print sculptures most of the time. It's easy to print, comes in the widest variety of colours and has relatively low ecological impact (it's produced from corn starch, not petroleum like most plastics).

When it comes to cultural geography again my interest in this started with personal experience. I went to India for three months when I was 21 and it opened my eyes and got me out of the frame of seeing the world in post-Cold War dichotomous categories. That was my first trip outside of Europe, and the culture shock of suddenly finding myself in the extreme chaos of Paharganj in New Delhi resulted in embracing a kind of relativist perspective. Places are inherently different, there is no way to create a common ground, or a common denominator between them. I later completely rejected this assumption. I have come back to India many times in the last 20 years, first mostly as a tourist and then to work on a variety of projects there.

One project that I would like to bring up here is *Prince Polonia*: a collaboration with writer and journalist Max Cegielski.

Prince Polonia was a hotel in New Delhi which catered mostly to Polish smugglers in the 1980's and 1990's, but the project dealt with a broader history of relations between Poland and India, starting from a visit of Jawaharlal Nehru to Warsaw in 1955, and ending with a visit of Polish president Lech Wałęsa to India in 1994. It covered many areas - from official political and economical cooperation (the non-aligned movement, global socialism), to cultural exchange (Red New Age) to Polish expeditions in the Himalaya and informal economies of smuggling networks of the 1980's. On the most general level it tried to tell the story of the cultural and political transformation of Poland during that time in a way that it was not normally told. Which is the Cold War narrative of the confrontation between the Soviet Bloc and the West with the latter eventually winning and imposing its values and economic system on Eastern Europe. The end product of that research was an exhibition consisting mostly of archival materials that was shown in several places including Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and Clark House in Bombay.

Another trip that influenced my thinking was crossing Asia with the Trans Siberian Railway in 2001. It took six days on a train from Moscow to the Chinese border. This trip gave me some sort of new understanding of what distance is, in a more physical and affective way. You don't get this when you travel by plane.

I started to incorporate travel into my artistic practice eventually. The first time was in 2007 with the project called *Polish Cultural Season on Madagascar*. It was quite complex and maybe there is no time here to explain all the contexts behind it but it involved research on history of unrealised Polish colonial aspirations from the 1930's (getting Madagascar

from France as a 'gift' was one of the ideas) and an actual trip to the island. The highlight of that research was a collection of publications by the Naval and Colonial League: the second biggest non governmental organisation of pre-war Poland that, among others, tried to ignite colonial fantasies and eventually get an actual colony for Poland. When you look at these materials now it clearly shows how grotesque the nationalist discourse of that time was. But it also opens doors to a more general question - to what extent Eastern Europe bears responsibility for the Western colonial project. There is no easy answer here and the issue has very important political implications now (creating an anti-immigrant hysteria was what brought the current fascist government to power in Poland in 2015).

We have certain tools and metaphors to imagine the world as a whole: the globe, the photographic image of our planet from space. But if you think about it a bit more it turns out that these are not particularly true and the actual space that we live in has a completely different shape. It takes ten hours to get to a remote part of South Western Poland where I sometimes go for holidays from Warsaw. At that time you can fly to Beijing. Crossing the Atlantic in the 17th century took six weeks, now it takes seven hours on a plane from London to New York. Another closely connected and equally interesting question is how this space is actually constructed. Where does it come from? There are many options here. One would be the classic cartographic construction through triangulation. You pick a base, a starting point and keep adding subsequent points one by one. Cartography as a political project also has a starting point: it's the exploration of the West African coast by Henry the Navigator in the 15th century.

But what I find more inspiring is another approach, trying to define the space through flows, streams of objects or people moving from one place to another. It is exciting to imagine all the container ships or planes or trains on the planet moving from one place to another in a certain moment.

I went to Alang several times: the world's biggest Ship Breaking Yard in Northwestern India. It's a huge dystopian place with thousands of workers dismantling ships in very dangerous, unregulated conditions. There is a market there that sells everything that was removed from those ships that is not scrap metal. I kept buying different kinds of frames there, things that were hung on walls on those dismantled ships. From maps, to health and safety regulations to art and personal photographs of sailors. I eventually got more than 200 objects coming from more than 40 countries. If you imagine a trajectory of each of these objects, going from port to port around the world for 30 sometimes 40 years and then sum all these trajectories together you will receive something that resembles a geometrical construction of our planet. What is interesting about it is that it has no beginning, no starting point. What it has is the end point - all those objects eventually ended up on a junk market in India.

The image of hundreds of container ships navigating the seas in any given moment influenced the way my mid-career retrospective was structured. When you imagine Europe in that context we are somewhere between Pearl River Delta factories and toxic e-waste dumps of West Africa. There were two small rooms at opposite ends of the institution where an exhibition of mine was located. I showed documentation of my trip to Huaqiangbei in Shenzhen.

It's a market neighbourhood where most of the Chinese electronic production is put on display, from tiny individual components to floors showcasing smart home solutions. You can find a five storey shopping mall there which only sells mobile phone cases etc. Or another one with drones or different LED lightning systems. The other room was devoted to Alaba International: a huge market in Lagos which, among other things, sells second hand electronic waste from Europe.

I hope this gives you an idea of what I mean by cultural geography & DIY technology. What would be the intersection then?

I can point to two examples from my own practice and one from outside of it. When I went to China for the first time I was cheated by black market money changers there. They had a tweaked calculator that would give slightly altered results. At that time almost nobody spoke English there so calculators were used as a communication tool - sellers could use them to show you prices. I was exchanging some dollars and felt that something was wrong when they counted the rate, so I took the calculator and recounted it but I got the same result. We repeated the calculation on a piece of paper in a hotel room and it turned out that the calculator they had was doctored and was giving false results. I decided to recreate this as a piece several years later. So I reverse engineered and reprogrammed a calculator to give slightly skewed results. Later, I used the calculator to construct several objects (like model houses etc). I think this piece kind of lies in the middle between my interests in making things and traveling and thinking about places.

The other example is the project I'm working on now for 1646. It starts with very geographical questions but tries to solve them using home-baked technology. It actually somehow tests boundaries of what can be done by one person with access to human scale equipment and budgets. Creating a database of 10.000 images needed to train a GAN is a labour intensive and boring process but it took me maybe three weeks and it's done. That would not be possible if I needed 100.000 images. Also I have a high-end computer with a top of the line gaming graphic card and it takes weeks to train the model but it will eventually be done. I can not afford access to arrays of €5000 graphic cards professional data scientists use, but I will still somehow manage to do what I planned from behind the desk in my apartment in Warsaw.

When it comes to examples from outside of my practice I could point to an amazing exhibition from Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe (the ZKM) called *Allah's Automata* which showed mechanical artefacts from the times of Islamic Renaissance and tried to reconstruct theoretical reflections around them.

Let me answer some of the questions about the project I'm preparing for 1646 now.

My interest in neural networks goes back to the late 90's and my failed cognitive science thesis. That had been the first wave of interest in those kinds of models which eventually waned after several years because the available computing power was not sufficient to train anything that would really work and solve problems. I remember an experiment which tried to simulate creativity on a neural network by adding random noise to neuron activation levels during

training. This of course is super-crude from today's perspective but it somehow showed what potential lies in this kind of approach. I've been loosely following developments in the field since then and as probably many other artists got excited when GAN's appeared. I used DCGAN for one work in 2018, which was a kind of joke on national identity. I harvested a dataset of polish faces from websites of casting agencies and face-banks and trained the model on them. The result was a series of glitchy portraits called *Synthetic Poles*. I also used neural network categorisers with different topologies to look through thousands of randomly generated patterns and find nice ones during work on the *Synthetic Folklore* project. It's kind of similar to the project I'll be showing in 1646 but instead of sculptures it takes a database of textile design patterns from different places as a starting point. So I definitely have experience with machine learning and can come up with ideas how it can be useful in my process but on the other hand I don't have enough understanding of linear algebra to really interpret the mathematical formulas or to really really understand what's going on there. My plan is to get there though ;). I also tend to think about these algorithms as tools. So the work is more about the AI helping me create interesting sculptures than proving that AI can create art by itself. At the end of the day I'm a visual artist not a scientist.

The dataset is very arbitrary for now. It's a collection of around 12k images I managed to find on ebay (mainly) and etsy. The images represent different styles of traditional sculptures from different places I'm aware of but this is in no way objective or representative for anything. So I don't think we can talk about blind spots here as the set is one big blind spot in itself.

I see this project as a long term commitment so maybe with time I will be able to get to the point where the dataset will have some more objective properties. This also implies an answer to another of your questions: what am I planning to do with the model? For now it's just a tool that I use to create images that inspire me, but eventually it can reach a point where it will be useful to other researchers. I will be happy to publish it then.

I don't think creating a usable 3D model from one 2D image is currently possible, but of course this vision is tempting in a way - being a kind of algorithm-artist. You just modify the algorithm from time to time, and then press ctrl-p to produce new works ;). I'm very far from there unfortunately - both modeling and printing is really labour intensive at the moment. Of course it brings questions about the role of craft or skills in the artist's process.

I will write a separate email about my 1980's computer scene research.

Uff ;) hope it's at least a bit clear and I managed to answer some of your questions ;)

All the best,

Janek

Sun, Feb 20, 10:16 AM

From: Florian

Hi Janek,

Great to hear from you. And thanks again for unfolding yet another layer of your practice by sharing your detailed description. This gives such a clear picture of where you come from and how your practice has developed.

I feel a certain connection being somewhat from the same generation, familiar with your approach. Although I've never been a professional creator I've been playing with the same software and similar approaches. I feel a clear kinship, for the lack of a better translation, about a shared time in how you describe your upbringing but specifically when I look at your 2005 work *Homemade Electronic Watch*. So thank you for sharing this with me.

Also nice to discover how this has empowered you, something I completely understand and see in your trajectory and work. I'm glad you brought up the idea of the distributed factory within these technical systems. For me that was always something I found within the DIY-lab (and sometimes fab-lab, a small-scale workshop offering digital fabrication) community where new technologies such as 3D printing and other tools were explained for free with the only condition that you'd help the next person interested in this technique. But I like how you seem to have found it in the soft- and hardware perspective as well. It's in line with the way you describe the role of the algorithms in your practice, as a tool which helps you build, experiment and reflect.

One aspect that seems to be present in a lot of your works, by working with consumer hardware and software, is the need to unpack it.

To be able to work with it the way you do, there is a need to have knowledge of the entire process which gives you a connection with the developer, process and material by opening something up and recreating things, seeing how the choices are made regardless of a commercial or aesthetic perspective. Things you can completely ignore or do differently in the development of your work.

Do you feel you approach it very differently? Knowing things like budget, time and utility are issues in every development - but you of course have a totally different production scale. I'm asking this because the project you're showing is one in which you knowingly worked with consumer computers adding the layer of limitation to your work. What is limitation for you in your artistic process? What did this do for you? And what did this artistically do to the project?

Discovering or exploring seems like a big part of your practice. In starting from scratch building something yourself, diving deep into a technique but also in literal form as traveling. Does this feel as a way to make sense of various constructs, systems (like time, space, distance) or even the world? Or how do you see this?

I'm of course very interested in your upcoming exhibition and would also like to know a little more about the presentation at 1646.

What will I step into?

What atmosphere are you planning to create?

What colour is the space, the walls, the floors?

And how are you planning to work with lighting?

Did I understand correctly that they could be either partly or 100% created by the AI

Do you leave us guessing?

The 'output'; the artworks you're presenting comes with deep newly acquired knowledge from first hand: yourself. Do you intend to make this a part of the presentation of the work? And are you thinking about showing aspects of the development process at all?

How do you introduce the figures to us? Are you presenting them on plints?

How many figures do you introduce to us? Will it be clusters, series or groups or do you present them anonymously in rows?

All the best,

Florian

Sun, Feb 27, 10:17 AM

From: Florian Weigl

Dear Janek,

Did you receive my previous email?

Feb 27, 2022, 12:24 PM

From: Janek

Hi Florian ,

yes yes, sorry for the delay, It's been a bit tense here in the last days (I live very close to the Russian embassy ..)

I will send you the answers tomorrow morning at last.

xx

Janek

Sun, Feb 27, 1:58 PM

From: Florian

No worries, I can imagine the world turning into a different place these days. It was more of a friendly reminder.

Best,

Florian

Feb 28, 2022, 3:08 PM

From: Janek

Dear Florian,

Thanks for kind words about my practice and sorry for the delay. Things have changed since my last email, especially here in Warsaw. I happen to live almost exactly between the Russian and Ukrainian embassies so there are demonstrations under my window every day. It kind of makes you reflect on the most general issues.

I share your enthusiasm toward the DIY-lab, fab-lab scene. It's a bit skewed in the corporate/start-up direction here in Warsaw. But you never know, it might swing toward the artist/hacker side of the spectrum one day - the tools are there. It's actually interesting to think what would be the use of all these devices in case of a situation people face now in Kyiv. I was 3D printing adapters used to link snorkeling masks with anti-bacterial air filters at the beginning of the pandemics for example. The problem we face here in Warsaw is a lack of affordable studio spaces. Even ten years ago you could have rented a space in an old factory on the far outskirts of the center relatively cheaply, now all these places are gone with the property market/construction boom. So it'll be crucial to develop some sort of equipment/space sharing technologies for artists, maybe we can look at fab-lab-like models here.

I have a childhood memory of unscrewing and opening my ZX Spectrum when I was maybe 8 or 9. Which was probably really stupid as I could have broken it, but I just couldn't resist the urge to do it. So you are totally right - unpacking, opening things is exciting to me. I enjoy repairing stuff too. This is very closely

connected to what you mention later - the discovery/exploration aspect of my practice. Curiosity is the main emotional motivation behind my work but as I mentioned before - I didn't study art, I studied psychology, so my thinking is influenced by the logic of scientific discovery too. And of course - what I want at the end is to get to the point that I understand as much as possible from the world around me and its different subsystems.

When it comes to limitations - I would say there are two aspects here. One is more, let's say, existential: how far you can go as a single human being. And of course at some point you will reach some kind of a limit and fail. That was inspiring to me at the beginning of my practice and my first major institutional show - *Gradient* in Bunkier Sztuki in Krakow in 2007 was based around that. It certainly is an interesting artistic strategy to set too ambitious goals, fail and then gather and process the remains. But for now I'm more interested in testing the boundary from the other side and actually finishing what I planned ;). The project I'll be showing in 1646 is a good example here. The awareness of pushing (at least my personal) limits it's actually what motivates me to do things like editing 12.000 images needed to train a GAN in Photoshop. The other aspect is more technical, practical limits. Like a limited budget can be inspiring. But that's not really the case here though as with my individual exhibitions I usually just draw from my art production 'war chest' ;) when I run out of the official budget.

When it comes to the exhibition design - I'm working on it now so I still don't have answers to all your questions, but let's start.

The exhibition will be divided into two parts, the first room will be devoted to the more objective side. I will show what the GAN actually generated in different ways. At the beginning I wasn't really keen to show the process but the work on it turned out to be less straightforward than I expected, so at the end I decided to share some aspects of it. It required quite a bit of hyperparameter tuning to make the GAN produce usable results. Most of my early attempts resulted in the so-called mode-collapse, a situation in which the generator ends up producing only very similar images. This effectively halts the training process. One interesting thing you can do with a trained GAN model is to try to interpret different dimensions of the latent space in human-readable categories (for example in case of portraits - big nose vs. small nose etc). So I will show some aspects of the model in the first room through a video animation and printouts.

The second, main room of 1646 will contain the sculptures. The process of turning the GAN-generated, a bit glitchy 2D images into 3D models can't be done automatically (at least for now) so this is the place where - whether I like it or not - my artistic subjectivity comes into play. I'm using a process similar to the one I developed while working on my former 3D printed sculpture series. First I work on a rougher sketch done in ZBrush, then I rework it into smooth NURBS geometry in Rhino 3D. Then it's 3D printed in different colours and materials. The result is, I would say 'cosmic' ;). I don't want to strike a too high tone here, but I certainly want these sculptures to have some sort of 'power'. Some sort of a promise of a better world.

When it comes to exhibition design I'm usually modest. I'm generally against producing anything that will be thrown away after the exhibition, like MDF plinths. I'm also not keen on using colored floors - again the material is usually thrown away after one use here. Of course wall color is a powerful tool in the hands of exhibition designers and I get tempted to use it from time to time, but in this case I don't think I will do it. The second room of 1646 is a really beautiful space, so I'll be happy to just leave it as it is in white. I will use a modular system to present the sculptures. Probably one that I used before, made out of glass squares connected with 3D printed corners. I'm attaching a photo here to make it easier to imagine what I talk about.

All the best,

Janek

Mon, Mar 21, 8:42 PM

From: Florian

Dear Janek,
Hope this email finds you well.

I'm writing to you just now because I finally found a moment to sit down to reply again. We're currently in a very changed Europe compared to how it was when we started this mail conversation. Changes that are affecting people in my personal life but also are becoming very visible in the streets of the cities I work in and live. So I am sure it has come just as close to yours. Especially living a lot closer and being located in between the Ukrainian and Russian embassies where weeks ago you already witnessed commotion on the streets. I looked up how they are situated in Warsaw and Google Maps gives me somewhat of an idea how it would be to be there right now.

One thing I didn't acknowledge in our exchange about the DIY-lab scene comparing it to your context was how ubiquitous (or logical) sharing in general is in Eastern European Art communities. Being there I've experienced help far beyond 'only sharing expensive tools', something that came close to being in the same family. From my experiences there I think if the availability of tools were more widely spread they would easily be communal tools. Or am I missing something in this observation?

I really enjoyed reading your view on limitations. The existential approach is one I appreciate a lot in someone's artist practice. The lengthy research process that ensures that you know exactly what you are talking about. This extensive research can be read and felt about how you speak about your project. I know that this is anything but a linear road from problem to solution, but a bumpy road where you



gradually come across a rich amount of new insights - which you then put in the project or in potential new explorations.

Introducing this idea of the boundary of the other, the outside world, life, I find interesting. It places you directly opposite to an ideal assignment, without a time limit with all the budget. What is the difference in the realisation of the project if you shift the limitation from your own abilities to those of all possible others?

Thanks for elaborating on how the exhibition is taking shape. I am very excited to read how you are planning to present your work in 1646.

Dividing the exhibition in two, letting your audience first walk into the 'technological' backside. Taking us along your process. In what way would you say that it turned out less straightforward than expected? Is what you're presenting in the first room a way to present specific meaningful steps in the process? Or is this part of the limitations you're working with? Are you aiming to show isolated selected steps in this part of your presentation form? Or would you prefer to show the process in realtime, if this was possible?

I won't ask much more about the second room. It sounds amazing and I can't wait to see the cosmic outcome. But in my previous mail I asked:
How do you introduce the figures to us?
How many figures do you introduce to us?
Will it be clusters, series or groups, or do you present them anonymously in rows?
Or is this something that is not completely clear about the shape or role yet?
Or is this not even what the project is about for you?

All my best,

Florian

Mon, Mar 28, 4:42 PM

From: Janek

Dear Florian,

First of all - I'm really sorry about my delayed answer, last weeks were pretty difficult here in Warsaw as we saw a huge wave of people from Ukraine coming to the city and everybody just tried to help as much as possible. I curated a show entitled *An exhibition of foreign artists living in Poland a few years ago*, as I thought that this group was really invisible to art institutions here at that time and I have many friends in the Ukrainian community since then. Some of them have families in besieged cities so it's all very personal and emotionally disturbing. Anyway I'm back on track and hopefully the show will be realised according to the plan.

I totally agree with what you wrote about Eastern European art scenes - especially in my generation that had to deal with severe limitations of everything we experienced in the 90's. It very much reinforced the DIY, mutual help attitude. I find the art scene here less competitive than in major centers like Berlin, although that's probably obvious. What is more specific to the Polish context is the relative low importance of visual art in culture in general. Polish culture traditionally has been literature, music and theater, not really visual arts. So we all feel like being in some sort of a niche of weirdos, and you don't get that amount of over-inflated egos as in the theater scene for example, which for sure helps ;). The unfortunate problem we have is the fascist government that has been here since 2015. At the beginning they were relatively benign but in the last few years they started waging full time culture war against the 'leftist' cultural scene and many institutions were

destroyed. This shifts focus to the market, the private gallery scene is pretty strong and growing in Warsaw. Unfortunately - as probably everywhere else - it's getting more and more conservative. You don't see many videos at art fairs anymore for example. Things like apartment galleries or ephemeral artist run spaces started to appear back. Which is really cool as I love this kind of energy but the problem is that it's impossible to get permanent funding for these kinds of institutions, so you have to apply from project to project which becomes tiring eventually. We will see where things will go... I really miss the time when I was running a project space in Krakow so maybe I will try to jump on this train again...

Thanks for kind words about my process, what I learned over the years is that it is really important to have a plan even if you are going to completely change it during the process. But of course this is more technical than existential. I can't find the exact quote now but I remember reading about John Armleder - an artist I very much admire - saying that he would go out to look for a table to be used in one of his *Furniture Sculpture* and come back with a sofa, or a grand piano or a basket of oranges instead. This is the essence of the artistic process for me - you know where you are going but you are very very open to detours and actually ending up being somewhere else. What is exciting about art is that the goal is not clearly defined. You don't really know what to look for exactly. Also the amount of work you put into something doesn't always correlate with the quality of the outcome. Sometimes spilling water on a gallery floor produces better art than years of studying human anatomy ;). I really like that aspect of the field, even though my projects usually involve a lot of labour.

I'm using an open source implementation of the Style-Gan 2 algorithm in this work which was specifically designed to produce fake human faces and it turned out that it won't work with images of sculptures out of the box. The images I use are diagonal (to get more meaningful pixels out of a square) not symmetrical, there is quite a lot of white space etc. I just needed to tweak some parameters and divide the training set into two groups to avoid the so-called Mode collapse - a situation in which the GAN starts to produce identical images which basically halts the training process. So I had to dig deeper into the design of the GAN to understand what the particular parameters mean and to learn some tricks to overcome the obstacles. As usual this opened doors to new ideas ;)

When it comes to the exhibition, I ended up deciding to present the neural network model through videos exploring the latent space without much other comment in the first room. Morphing sculptures will be shown on vertically positioned monitors. That's the objective part.

In the second room I will present a group of sculptures (around 12 - I'm still printing them). I modeled and printed them one by one, so it's also a process of experimentation on how the somewhat glitchy results of the GAN training are recreated as 3D models. And a little bit of experimentation with the FDM technology. So there is not really any particular order or group clusters or anything like that. I'm building a structure out of glass squares connected with - again - 3D printed connectors. It's a display system I used in some of my previous exhibitions. There are two aspects here. One is the vertical nature of the 1646 space - I will try to emphasize that with the design. The other is that

I would rather show the sculptures as a group of connected objects. This exhibition is a starting point for a project that I will definitely develop further, so I also want to suggest that 'open endedness' a bit.

Hope it all makes at least a bit of sense ;)

All the best,

Janek

Mon, Apr 1, 5:33 PM

From: Florian

Dear Janek,

I can only imagine how the situation in Poland is now. Amsterdam central station is also welcoming a lot of refugees. Sadly I think it will only be more.

Hope you're doing well under the current circumstances. Today at V2_ I found your 1646 flyer in our mailbox. Looks great. So good to hear you're back on track.

I really like how you're planning to present all elements in the exhibition. Unpacking your technology in the mentioned way sounds great. I hope you're able to translate all of the thought and consideration you put into it. And I can't wait to see the individual sculptures you put together. Sadly I'm not able to write a more elaborate email today, so I guess this is it in terms of publication.

I'm very open to continuing our conversation or picking it up at a later stage.

All the best with the preparations looking forward to seeing it and meeting you in person.

Please feel free to continue the conversation

or ask me anything

and of course keep my contact-information

because I'd like to continue the conversation,

- Florian