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Review

Martina Ivičič
Men with No Story. On the Work and Exhibition Kronos by Martina Lukić

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Martina Lukić (born Šimkovičová) has long been reflecting on the coherence between analog and digital photography in her practice. The exhibition *Kronos* at the Gallery of the City of Blansko brings a visual dialogue between the historical photographic technique of anthotype and artificial intelligence tools.

The title of the *Kronos* exhibition refers to the ancient mythical god, personifying time and its flow. The mythological story speaks of his hopeless fear of being surpassed and overcome by something more perfect than himself. *Kronos'* determination to do anything to attain power eventually surpassed any ethical or moral restraints.

In the exhibition, the artist presents two sets of works. Affective Metadata (2022) is a website with generated visuals from the CLIP model, based on data collection about users and their subsequent analysis and interpretation. In this text, we will focus on the work *Kronos* (2023), which presents a series of anthotypic portraits. The entire creation process had

several phases. The artist generated negatives using artificial intelligence tools (Stable Diffusion, DALL-E). The aim was to explore the relationship between subject and object.

In this moment, you may try to create an imaginary image based on this description: "A striking character portrait of an old man interacting with AI." The difference between you and AI is that as a human actor, you would first reflect, then perhaps smile slightly, and maybe imagine your grandfather sitting on the porch trying, in vain, to understand what artificial intelligence is. Unlike you, AI would dive into work without hesitation, searching its mega-database, and within seconds

present you with the resulting image based on learned algorithms.

The creation of *anthotype* dates back to the 1830s, with one of its contributors being Sir John Herschel. Despite being pursued only by enthusiasts nowadays, this technique represents one of the foundational points of the photographic medium. To achieve the resulting colour, it utilizes the photosensitive properties of plant pigments. The emergence and formation of anthotype also reflect the gradual transformation of scientific procedures from approximate experiments to exact hypothesis testing.

Among the many natural dyes, Martina Lukić chose turmeric, initially mixing it with domestic alcohol. After several time-consuming experiments, she found that ethanol worked better. She applied the dense solution to paper with an adjusted pH and, after drying, attached a negative with a portrait generated by AI. During long summer days in the Serbian town of Sombor, the author waited for the reaction of the photosensitive substance to UV light. She also worked simultaneously with coating clean cherry juice on paper, realizing that cherry juice exposes more slowly and takes several weeks for

the outlines to appear. Yellowish portraits from turmeric succeeded one morning, so she immediately stabilized them in a solution of baking soda.

Since anthotype utilizes natural elements, the author must anticipate a certain kind of failure or "betrayal". This process also evokes certain expectations, which, as we know, often lead to disappointment with the outcome. The ephemeral nature of photographic images was acknowledged by the author, who also considered the possibility that the contrast might change during the exhibition. Natural dyes continue to work; the anthotypic portrait

becomes a process piece in the gallery environment, which despite the application of a stabilizing solution, can completely fade away.
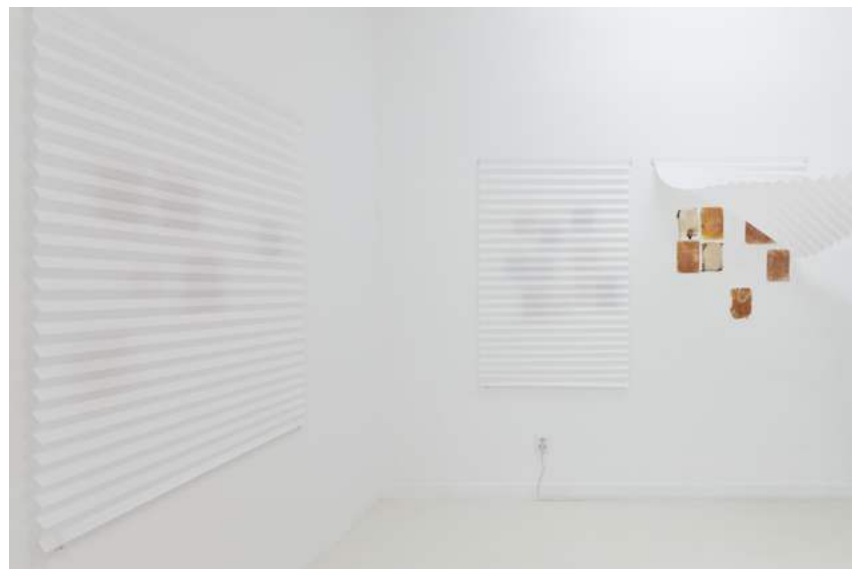
The outlines slowly begin to appear on paper. The natural dye contrasts with the paper, and we recognize the faces of unknown men. Who are these men, and what is their story? We humans can recognize wisdom and experience gained throughout their lives in their features, a gentle kind smile, wrinkles of happiness, pride, and fatigue. A person with their own tacit abilities senses these characteristics or emotions. But what about artificial intelligence and its software generative tools?

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M.I.: What were your expectations for this task?

M.L.: My initial text prompt was: "wise man interacting with AI". Based on my modifiers (parts of the textual assignment that influence aesthetic means), which either related to series A to photography or to specific authors, I expected different people interacting with various types of interfaces. However, alongside such results, I was surprised by the frequency of old men interacting with other men, who appeared perfectly human. It was not possible to determine unequivocally who should be the "AI" and who the "real person" was. By using the "evolve" tool, the initial images shifted to images of some sort of wizards with amulets, either lightly reminiscent of "Lord of the Rings" style or Asian-looking monks, even though none of the modifiers referred to this type of visual. I assume that these shifts are the result of anti-bias filters intended by the authors of these tools to balance the discriminatory features of the original datasets. The set exhibited at the Gallery of the City of Blansko represents a selection of these initial reactions. The goal of this selection was to consider what conception of wisdom is close to us.

We often have high expectations for software generative tools in terms of high-quality images and their diversity. In practice,

generative models sometimes hallucinate, meaning they create entirely fictitious, non-existent data and connections in the real world. In the context of art history, sometimes the images resemble pure mental automatism. It lacks aesthetic, ethical, or other intentions of human actors/authors. Although AI is trained based on truthful data, it will still generate fictional

outputs. The creation of these images is the result of an endless loop of reality fragmentation from its exact description, the process of data collection, decoding, and finally recoding. But what happens out there, beyond the data megaspace? In reality, elements of deepening anomie begin to emerge slowly, like a long exposure process. This state, described by É.

Durkheim (2004) as a state of the disintegration of norms of social behaviour in society, which has become disoriented due to accelerated changes. This exceptional state of society or social group manifests itself at an individual level in various forms of disillusionment, anxiety, fatigue, and even disgust. We try to understand what we have created. So how is it possible that we stumble, don't understand the rules, and fail to recognize reality and fiction? The rules and commands of artificial neural networks are endlessly encoded and programmed using algorithms, but the result is always limitless and unpredictable.

The set of archaic-looking photographic portraits in the gallery is hidden under a paper blind that the viewer must uncover as a first step. The blinds serve a protective function against fading; there is also a voyeuristic aspect and intimate closeness with the portraits.

M.I.: What parallels do you see between the long exposure process of anthotype and the artificial intelligence technology DALL-E?

M.L.: I see a parallel between both approaches, or even media, in how they follow the line from trial and error to achieving a perfect tool under the creator's complete control. Anthotype was a precursor to precise chemical

compounds that now form photographic emulsion. Before DALL-E and Stable Diffusion, one of the paths was visual tools based on generative adversarial network – GAN. GANism (Chollet, 2017), as "a specific visual and feeling of images that appear to be the result of generation with generative adversarial networks", was a term proposed by an engineer, Francois Chollet, in a tweet back in 2017. It can be seen on one hand as a hype of networks or seeking sensations that would further propel the world of non-fungible tokens (NFTs). On the other hand, as Lev Manovich and others mention in informal discussions to this day, it represents a certain ratio of unexpected results, even glitches, which in the process of creation present a certain adventure. Although GAN is no longer the most up-to-date tool for generative visuals for at least two years now, ganism is still a useful term in this sense. Developers of current tools are also following the line of perfect control of the result by the creator through the most precise setting of parameters. This happens through communication and a kind of translation of our thoughts and ideas into machine language. This raises the question of whether we are adapting the tool to its user, or are we adapting to it to make it do what we want.

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Reviewed Exhibition

Martina Šimkovičová – *Kronos*
November 18th 2023 – January 6th 2024
Curator: Júlia Bútorová
Gallery of the City of Blansko
Czech Republic

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Installation views by Polina Davydenko (C).

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