

Adrián Melis & Jānis Avotiņš

Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More

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14 March - 18 April 2015

In this exhibition Adrián Melis (Havana, 1985) and Jānis Avotiņš (Riga, 1981) contemplate upon the Communist system in their work, albeit from different viewpoints. In the case of Adrián Melis the system is a part of every day life in Cuba, whereas in the life of Jānis Avotiņš it exists as a faint memory from childhood before the collapse of the USSR. The title of this exhibition, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* refers to a book written by the Russian writer Alexei Yurchak. Yurchak explores the paradoxes of the Soviet life during the period of 'late socialism', between 1960 and 1980, through the eyes of the last Soviet generation.

Adrián Melis, who debuted in 2013 internationally at the Kunsthalle Basel with his show 'The Value of Absence' and is now in his second year at the Rijksakademie Amsterdam, investigates a.o. paradox situations of the Communist system in Cuba. The general lack of productivity in Cuban state-run enterprises is the starting point of the works presented by Melis at AKINCI. In the context of his projects he replaces the absence of labour productivity with (subversive) artistic creativity.

In the work 'The Value of Absence' (2013), shown at AKINCI, Melis records the creative mental process involved in making excuses to avoid work. Taking advantage of workers' lack of motivation, Melis got in contact with numerous workers who would get paid for not going to work. The artist's aim was to compile as many excuses as possible by purchasing the rights to record the telephone conversations. This way, Melis generated a community of people whom he paid the same amount of money that the State would have paid for their labour.

Moments that shaped the world I, II, III is a trilogy of video works where the juxtaposition of images and sound modifies one's perception and suggests new meanings.

In Moments that shaped the world I - Havana- Berlin juxtaposes the long shot of a present street in Havana and the audio archive from the CNN live broadcast of the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. This simple disjunction between image and sound suggests the persistence of an ideological system which already fell apart in certain parts of the world, yet still conditions life in Cuba.

The paintings of Jānis Avotiņš breathe the atmosphere of an eternal and bleak world where every action seems to be frozen in eternity. They are like dreamscapes, functioning as cropped memories, inspired by portraits from old newspapers, documentary photos, and screenshots from Soviet films. In particular photographs of conferences triggered Avotiņš' attention, devoid of any context the participants seem anonymous and therefore replaceable. After going through countless archives, Avotiņš had to conclude that, although, these endless amounts of photographs were meant to function as manifestations of ideology, the images were visually almost identical, the camera positions, the headlines, the gestures etc, seemed always the same, no matter if they were taken in 1964, 1965, 1966 or 1967.

Alexei Yurchak explains in his book that Soviet socialism was based on paradoxes that were revealed by the peculiar experience of its collapse. To the people who lived in that system the collapse seemed both completely unexpected and at the same time completely unsurprising. At the moment of collapse it suddenly became obvious that Soviet life had always seemed simultaneously eternal and stagnating, vigorous and ailing, bleak and full of promise. Avotiņš' paintings are like flashbacks from a collective memory. However, according to Avotiņš the collective memory is actually the 'collective denial' of a whole generation who, as in his case, have never experienced the Communist system, but rather have banned it out of their lives without ever taking part in it.

Adrián Melis
Stock (2012)
series of digital prints on 5 mm forex
24,5 x 19,5 cm x 20
ed. 2/3



Stock displays a series of photographs with a documentary approach to illegal activity. They document the theft of material from buildings or warehouses that are under construction. Each image is completed with a note that specifies the quantity and typology of the subtracted material. The words replace what is absent, giving back what has disappeared and reintroducing the indexical character of the photographic images.

Details from *Stock*:



8 bags of grey concrete, 5 iron bars and 10 bricks

*8 bags of grey concrete, 5 iron bars
and 10 bricks*



18 lobsters

18 lobsters



3,5 bags of grey concrete and 2 of washed sand

*3,5 bags of grey concrete
and 2 of washed sand*



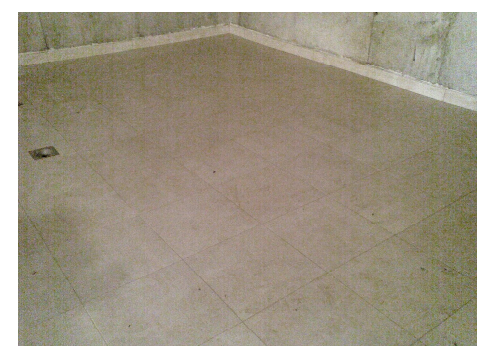
36,8 pounds of flour for pizza

36,8 pounds of flour for pizza



20 planks made of cedar

36,8 pounds of flour for pizza



4 boxes of Aged Habana-Club rum bottles

4 boxes of Aged Habana-Club rum bottles

Adrián Melis
Moments that shaped the world
 —File I, II, III

These are the first chapters of a series of videos in which the juxtaposition of images and sound alters one's perception and suggests new meanings.



Moments that shaped the world — File I: La Habana (2012)
 video
 5 min.
 ed. 3/10

In *File I: La Habana*, a long shot of a street in Havana is accompanied by the audio footage of CNN's live broadcasting during the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. The simple disjunction between image and sound suggests the persistence of an ideological system. One which has already fallen apart in certain parts of the world, but still conditions daily life in Cuba.



Moments that shaped the world — File II: Primavera Sound (2012)

video

4.16 min.

ed. 4/10

File II: Primavera Sound contrasts images, from a popular music festival in the city of Barcelona, with the audio archive of the M-15 movement's street protests, marking their most recent socio-political events. The video suggests a certain frustration towards political protests, which, in the end, are reduced to mere spectacle.



Moments that shaped the world — File III: The East is Red (2013)

video

3.17 min.

ed. 4/10

File III: The East is Red parallels images of flickering neon lights in today's China, with an extract from Raul Castro's 2008 song "The East is Red," about Chinese communism. It aims to portray past ideals of an ideological future, and how now, ironically, the country finds itself blossoming under capitalism.

Adrián Melis

Here everybody takes care of me (2006)

video, DVD color, stereo

5.30 min.

ed. 1/10



This video shows a secretly filmed interview with the director of a company. This director suffers from schizophrenia disorders. Actually, these disorders allow him, in turn, to lead a form of management in which he simulates not to be aware of illicit activities. In reality, it becomes a kind of tacit agreement among all.



Adrián Melis

The Value of Absence—Excuses to be absent from your workplace
(2009-2010)

video installation

10.20 min.

In Cuba, great dissatisfaction, indifference and lack of motivation toward the socialist system of production have led to the phenomenon of making excuses to stay away from work, an attitude which is notably tolerated by governmental enterprises.

With *The Value of Absence—Excuses to be absent from your workplace*, Melis reveals the mental process and creativity involved in making such excuses to avoid work. The telephone appears to be a favourite mean, as it allows a wide range of fictional stories to be concocted. By purchasing the rights to record the telephone conversations, the artist compiled as many excuses as possible. The price paid for one excuse equalled that of the deduction applied to the salary arising from the days of absence from work. Thus, the artist generated a community of people receiving the exact amount of money the State would have paid for their productivity; in this case, however, without having to perform any productive task.

Effective for the period of one day up to a month—or even longer the excuses foster an absence from work in different ways. Sometimes a worker uses only one excuse, sometimes several. The payment for the excuses was made once the period of absence had ended. Up to date, a total of 114 people have called in absent in State work places. The total number of days not worked is 327, by an approximated value of 3065, 65 Cuban pesos (CUP), which is equivalent to around 127,70 Cuban convertible pesos (CUC) and 100 Euro.



Jānis Avotiņš
- (2015)
oil on canvas
15,4 x 6,8 cm



Jānis Avotiņš
- (2015)
oil on canvas
10.5 x 14.5 cm



Jānis Avotiņš
- (2015)
oil on canvas
26.4 x 13 cm



Jānis Avotiņš
- (2015)
oil on canvas
11.2 x 17.8 cm



Jānis Avotiņš
- (2015)
oil on canvas
30 x 12.8 cm



Jānis Avotiņš
List (2015)
acrylic on canvas
167 x 265,5 cm



Jānis Avotiņš
Driver and Retiree (2004)
oil on canvas
24 x 30 cm

Biography Adrián Melis

Born in 1985 in Havana (Cuba), Adrián Melis studied at the San Alejandro Fine Arts Academy (2000-04), High Institute of Art (2005-10) and the Cátedra de Arte Conducta (2007-09) in Havana. He is currently artist in residence at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam. Melis has had solo exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Basel (2013), Museum of Modern Art, Santander (2012) and Adn Galería, Barcelona (2012-13). His work has been presented in group shows throughout Europe and the USA, a.o. the MoMA—Museum of Modern Art in New York (2014), the Future Generation Art Prize at Pinchuk Art Centre in Kiev (2014), Loop Festival in Barcelona (2014), the Neue Galerie in Innsbruck (2014), The Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (2013) and repeatedly in his birth town during the Bienal de la Habana. Melis has been awarded with the Art Nou Prize (2013) for best exhibition (Adn Galería: *Time to Relax*), Barcelona, and the Bueno, Bonito y Barato Prize (2006) for curatorship, received by the Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional, Havana. He lives and works in Barcelona and Amsterdam.

Biography Jānis Avotiņš

Jānis Avotiņš, born in 1981 in Riga (Latvia), graduated from the Janis Rozentals School of Fine Art (1999). He pursued his studies at the Manchester University (2002) and received a BA Painting at the Latvian Academy of Art (2003). Avotiņš' work has been presented in exhibitions throughout Europe and the USA, a.o. the Saatchi Gallery, London (2012), Hudson Valley Centre for Contemporary Art, New York (2006/07/10), Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen (2008), Villa Manin Centro d'Arte Contemporanea, Codroipo/Udine (2006) and the Prague Biennale (2005/07). He has had solo exhibitions at Galerie Rüdiger Schöttle (Munich), Vera Munro (Hamburg), AKINCI (Amsterdam), and is represented by IBID Projects in London and the Johnen Galerie in Berlin. His works are in various collections, a.o. the Saatchi Collection in London and The Cartin Collection in Boston. Avotiņš lives and works in Riga.