

LOOKING BACK TO LOOK FORWARD

An Interview with Alt Går Bra

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Introduction by Zanna Gilbert

How do we negotiate our relationship to obsolete technology amidst a consumer culture of planned obsolescence? Who decided that the discarded technology was not wanted any longer, and do we accept that these useful, working machines should be committed to the graveyard of history? What if we were to resuscitate these machines for our contemporary needs and adapt them? What stories can they tell about capitalism, labor, and social life?

These are but a few of the rich array of questions and tensions addressed by the artist collective Alt Går Bra. By choosing to use mimeography to make their work – specifically Gestetner machines – the group explores how such a choice affects what they create: an outcome that is both manual and machine bound. This use of outdated technology is not perverse but seeks to reveal something about our contemporary engagement with technology, printing and publishing. In his essay “Why

I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer,” poet and critic Wendell Berry points out that owning a computer will not, as some have suggested to him, make him a better writer.¹ Further, he calls into question the fact that, as a writer, he should depend on stripped-mined coal to produce energy for his computer. Alt Går Bra’s arguments, like Berry’s, are not purely luddite or Romantic. The ways in which a technology can aid rather than overtake its purpose is what seems to be at stake here.

The group also probes the problem of original and copy, finding the problem itself to be obsolete, and instead offer a vision of present culture as one of endless remix of human history. Multiples usually refer to a predetermined edition of identical works by an artist, one sanctioned by that same artist, a publisher, printer or gallery. Multiples play with questions of value, authenticity and authorship that were so thoroughly dismantled during this and

1 Wendell Berry, “Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer,” in *New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1987, p. 112-113.

subsequent periods. Multiples also heralded the possibility of reaching a broader audience. Perhaps the charged nature of multiplicity was only wrested back later by those stewards and profiteers of culture that had standards to uphold. What of copying? Is 'multiple' in fact a euphuism for its nefarious and mistrusted cousin, the copy? To copy implies falsification, forgery even, or alternatively the unbecoming drudgery of the duplicator, suggesting office workers robotically producing documents. Alt Går Bra, however, recover the copy by positing it as an arena not only of multiplicity but of possibility.

By working collectively, Alt Går Bra embrace the problem of the copy in their methodology – each member represents the whole of the group. At a time when branding oneself on social media is commonplace, the anonymity of these multiple authors offers a radical disavowal of this identity-as-brand. Alt Går Bra's use of obsolete print media is forged together with contemporary techniques, such as the use of desktop publishing software. It is at this meeting point of machine and meaning that the group creates their work – not to use the outdated machine for its aesthetic appearances, but to find legitimate necessities to bring back what has heretofore been discarded. Indeed, the theoretical thought embedded in their practice thoroughly dissects the ways in which philosophers have understood technology. Alt Går Bra carefully and critically consider the Janus-face of technology, asking when and why we opted for today's overdeveloped technologies and what we might learn by looking back to look forward.

– **Zanna Gilbert. Can you tell me about the Alt Går Bra collective and the group's name? How did you come to work together?**

– **Alt Går Bra.** The name Alt Går Bra is a Norwegian phrase meaning *tout va bien*, or everything goes well. In Norwegian, just like in

French, the phrase is verbally clear, but its use is ambiguous. It might mean that everything is fine, but also the opposite, depending on the context. Alt Går Bra is an expression from common language that bears an ambiguity, a distance, a space for the interlocutor to fill in. It is not to be taken literally, just like good art. As you might very well know, *Tout Va Bien* is also the title of one of Jean-Luc Godard's films.

We are three members working collectively, not in anonymity, but we work in such a way that we could not point at who does what. Alt Går Bra conceives authorship in a slightly different manner than many other artists. Our work is not made by an individual but by a group. In addition, we believe that there is something unrealistic in the very idea of authorship. There is so much that we owe to the past that it feels like an overstatement for us to say "we created this work." We can recreate, give new contexts, but what we can claim as "our own creation" is only a tiny fraction. The rest is to be credited to human history. This might be a way to start discussing the original and the copy.

The very functioning of the group is somehow based on the idea of duplication. We believe that each member should acquire the skills and qualities of the others. We play with the idea of cloning each other and that none of us should be irreplaceable. In a sense, duplication is not only what we do with our machines but it is also what we do among ourselves as individual members of the group. This working method greatly enhances our individual potential.

– **Zanna Gilbert. Can you describe some of your recent projects?**

– **Alt Går Bra.** Generally, we produce work with a sense of urgency. We produce constantly, mostly in conversation with people with different backgrounds and interests. Our projects usually depart from philosophy and history.

Then, theoretical and discursive elements take a tangible form at the studio.

We have been working on *Den Norske Idealstaten* since 2017. This project consists in rewriting Plato's *Republic* with the people of Norway. We have conducted a survey across the country, asking people about their dreams and visions for their ideal State or society. Inspired by the results of the survey, we produce coats of arms, acrylic on 30 × 60 cm aluminium shields. This project led us to reflect upon the ontology of certain objects whose format we use to produce art pieces, like civic coats of arms and banners (*fane* in Norwegian). Unlike most other objects, the essence and value of these objects reside in their communality. These are objects that resist private appropriation. You can buy a reproduction of them, but you cannot buy them in the same way as you could purchase, let's say a painting by David or a Gucci handbag. Our serialized production of coats of arms and banners, together with our ontological questioning about them share something with Benjamin's reflections on authenticity, tradition, and reproduction.

Similarly, the work we have been doing with the mimeograph falls within this kind of inquiry. We have worked with these obsolete printing machines for five years. The last two years, we have had a base in London, where we conducted research at several institutions. This work culminated with an exhibition at Bruce Castle Museum, located in Tottenham, where the largest mimeograph factory in the world had its headquarters. We are currently co-editing a book with Prof. Teal Triggs that will present the papers from the conference we convened at the University of Westminster in February 2019, together with our own research. This will be our second book dedicated to the mimeograph. In 2016 we published *The Mimeograph, A Tool for Radical Art and Political Contestation*, which was the first scholarly book ever devoted to the mimeograph.

We just started working on another duplicating project, focusing on an architectural ornament: the acanthus leaf. Perhaps, we will have the opportunity to tell you more about this later.

– **Zanna Gilbert. And how did you come to work with the mimeo and Gestetner presses?**

– **Alt Går Bra.** When we started Alt Går Bra, we set two premises: to acquire the ability to print our own publications and to organize a series of talks on art and theory that would serve as both an input and an output for our theoretical research.

We began looking into options to run our own press in 2014-2015. One of us remembered their mom being a teacher and telling the story of how she would make “photocopies” for her students. This was an extremely simple way to make copies, using a gelly pad and carbon paper. We started making hectographs, which is a technique with plenty of potential, but quickly realized that it was not what we needed to produce our own books. We were looking into a more efficient and sophisticated technology that would, at the same time, offer plenty of opportunities for manual work and be able to adapt to our needs.

In our research, we came across a frenetic art collective founded in the mid-1960s in Haight-Ashbury, San Francisco. The name of the collective was Communication Company and it lasted only for one year. Reading about them, we immediately understood that we needed the same setup they had, so we became determined to find a Gestetner 366, a Gestefax, and other tools and consumables, which have been obsolete for the last 30-40 years.

– **Zanna Gilbert. Can you tell me about the process of making prints and publications with these machines? How does the technique inform your practice? Are there special qualities that you try to harness, would**

you say you use these machines beyond their intended limits and purpose?

– **Alt Går Bra.** What we can say about the process is that it is simply fascinating. Mimeographs print using a silkscreen and a master called stencil. Wax-coated stencils require manually intensive work consisting in removing the wax, a process similar to some forms of engraving, using special tools including styli, wheelpens, and shading plates—for text, you use a typewriter and lettering guides. Electro-stencils entail a much more automated process, performed by an ancestor of today’s scanner, known as fax or Gestefax. Once ready, the stencil is mounted on top of the silkscreen and printing is done by spinning the drums either manually with the crank or automatically—if the machine is equipped with a motor. It should be noted that we are talking about a highly efficient technology that can produce one hundred prints per minute and four thousand copies per master. Of course, we are in the world of the analog, so everything depends. Wax stencils are fragile, and the more elaborate masters tend to wear down rather quickly—you cannot expect to produce more than fifty prints with certain motives on wax stencils, so you have to be ready to replicate the engraving as many times as needed.

Concerning your second question, we use the mimeograph expressly so that the machine informs our practice. Art, theory, and technology fall close together through our mimeograph practice.

There are several special qualities we try to harness. It is important for us to master the tools as people did in the 1940s or 50s, without rejecting technologies and working methods available to us today. Except for one of our books, which we decided to fully produce without a computer, our publications are designed with desktop publishing software. Our work and the tools we use are not some sort of *cabinet de curiosités* from the last century, but

a means to interrogate technology and labor. What we are trying to say here might have a correlation with the issue of antiquarians versus historians and archaeologists, where we would, of course, identify ourselves with the latter two. This comparison is both a provocation and a reminder of the studies on antiquarianism by Arnaldo Momigliano, whose essay on Walter Benjamin as an antiquarian², for instance, could lead to interesting observations on methodology. The centrality of Saussurean synchronicity and diachronicity to Momigliano’s project can act as a hint for the prominent place that history occupies in regards to our mimeograph practice, and in our project at large.

Furthermore, mimeographs were never used within their intended limits and purposes. The machines are too adaptable for users not to appropriate them for their own purposes and needs. This is perhaps why the mimeograph was at the root of so many revolutions throughout the last century. We are now using the mimeographs to print on fabric and to produce large-scale installations. The canvas of the mimeograph is the A4 format—these were office machines, designed to duplicate documents. Yet, it did not take us too long to figure out that the length limitation could be overcome. This was in the middle of the night, so we tried out with a kitchen towel roll. There was, then, no limit to length, but we now needed enough space for the printed rolls, finally resolving that by feeding them out through the windows. We also overcame the width limitation by folding sheets of paper larger than A4. Trying out different supports, we also realized that the machines were not only good to print on paper but also on canvas, wood, and other materials.

2 Arnaldo Momigliano, “Walter Benjamin,” in *Essays on Ancient and Modern Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), 199.

– **Zanna Gilbert.** There's a certain kind of nostalgia implicit in using antiquated media. Somebody recently said to me that it was impossible to take seriously someone making art with a typewriter in the contemporary sphere, because the look of the text carries so much information: its use basically communicates that it is from another era. There are also a lot of new online skeuomorphic user interfaces that hark upon the look of older technologies, like typewriting, Xerox, and Polaroid as design. Do you share the sentiments of this commentator, or is it more complex for you?

– **Alt Går Bra.** Yes, the commentator is right, even if we would like for him to be wrong. This has been very problematic for us. It is difficult to claim that using the mimeograph is not a Romantic gesture.

We think that the key is to understand how to use an obsolete machine incorporating new technologies available to us today. For instance, we would not type the text for a 200-page book using a typewriter, when it was already typed on a computer with all the editing capabilities offered by these machines. This would be somehow defeating the purpose of what we are trying to do. But perhaps the most important thing is to resort to the outmoded for a legitimate purpose and not the opposite—to use its aesthetics to fill in for a lack of content or ideas. As we said earlier, we chose the mimeograph, the high-end Gestetner machines, to be more precise, because they suit our needs: what we want to produce and how we want to produce it. The mimeograph is a middle term: a tool. Hegel beautifully describes the tool as standing “higher than labor, higher than the object, and higher than enjoyment or the end aimed at.”³ If the choice of tool feels pertinent

and the work produced with it speaks to a contemporary public, then art made with obsolete technology can be taken seriously.

Yet, what the commentator pointed out will perhaps always remain a challenge for us. The mimeograph is rich in contradictions, which can actually make it more interesting.

– **Zanna Gilbert.** What do you think has stimulated the rise of Riso and the rediscovery and flourishing of hand printing? Can it be pinpointed to a specific time?

– **Alt Går Bra.** Actually, Riso printing is a later automated version of mimeo printing.

Making a book by hand changes the whole thinking process. You think and write in a very different way when you know that it is yourself who will be doing all the printing, collating, and binding by hand. And you print, collate, and bind in a different way when you make a book with your own writing.

There is also a downside to this revival of the handmade. During the 1970s, many handmade items acquired a cheap or unfashionable connotation. Frozen food and mass made jeans came into fashion. Now, freshly cultivated vegetables are in, for example. The problem is that organic food is only affordable to some. So now those with means eat what they once despised. We are afraid that something similar might happen with books. Again you have the contradictions of the mimeograph. If you make the books yourself, then they are not for everybody because of the modes of production.

– **Zanna Gilbert.** When you make your books, who are you targeting?

– **Alt Går Bra.** Much of our project is invested in understanding the relevance of art for society. What is the intrinsic value of art? Socrates resorts to what he describes as „a rather

³ G.W.F. Hegel, *System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit*, trans. H. S. Harris and T. M. Knox (Albany: S.U.N.Y. Press, 1979), 113.

absurd figure“ who „attaches himself to the city as a gadfly to a horse, which, though large and well bred, is sluggish on account of his size and needs to be aroused by stinging.“

The paradox is that when it comes to our publications, we rarely think about our targeted audience. Maybe because it is already so thrilling to get these books made that we do not allocate the time to think about whom we are trying to address. We hope that pretty much anyone who comes across our books can understand what we are trying to do, putting theory and manual labor at the same level. Funnily enough, people who seem to appreciate our publishing practice more integrally are rather those outside the art world. In our experience, there seems to be a tendency toward exclusion: you either have the manual skills to make a beautiful object or you know your Aristotle— you cannot combine both. This contradiction is reflected often in contemporary art but also in our larger culture which has a tendency to equate ugliness with truth. We would love to have a longer discussion about the role of beauty. But this is exactly the most interesting place for us to inhabit, where contradictions become apparent.

– **Zanna Gilbert. Were the positions of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement in general important in developing your own approach?**

– **Alt Går Bra.** Dialectically important. Art is a privileged site today to experience the tensions between labor, technology, and alienation. Our work looks into the savoir faire of the Arts and Crafts movement and we are interested in preserving certain traditions involving manual work, including the Norwegian tradition of making *faner* (banners) or hand-etching stencils, as we have already emphasized. We enjoy being in sites of incompatibilities such as that of bringing together manual work and theory.

There is a whole set of Romantic values in Morris that we distrust, including his somehow unidimensional approach to technology and progress. For us, it is exciting to imagine a rapprochement between fine arts and crafts, namely through ornamental architecture.

– **Zanna Gilbert. Your mention of sleep in a paper written to open the conference you organized at the University of Westminster reminded me of 24/7 by Jonathan Crary⁴ in which he explores sleep as a last frontier of capitalism. What do you think the relationship of printed matter and obsolete printing technologies is to this question of new technologies capturing of our time and attention?**

– **Alt Går Bra.** This is a complex question and this is why we convened a conference at the University of Westminster in February 2019.⁵ Our answer can be found in that paper we wrote to open the conference.⁶ The mimeograph is a remarkable site to explore the increasingly pressing issue of technology. We believe that there have been two major splits in history, one happened when art and technology broke apart. The Ancient Greek word *technē* means art. The second split was when art broke away from architecture. This means when ornamentation left the building and architecture remained alone with design. It is interesting to

4 Jonathan Crary, *24 heures sur 24 et 7 jours sur 7 : le capitalisme à l'assaut du sommeil*, Grégoire Chamayou (trad. fra.), La Découverte (Zones), 2014 [éd. orig. : *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, New York, Verso, 2013].

5 International conference convened by Alt Går Bra, “The Art of the Mimeograph”, London, University of Westminster, 7th-8th February 2019, see the videos online: <https://bit.ly/2ktyoaR>.

6 See Alt Går Bra, “The Mimeograph, Technology, and Labor”, presented at “The Art of the Mimeograph”, a conference at the University of Westminster (see note 2) [online: <http://altgarbra.org/uploads/mimeographTechnology.pdf>]; first published in Alt Går Bra and Magnus Michelsen (eds.), *Tout Va Bien*, Bergen, Alt Går Bra, 2018.

look at the old and the new Palais de Justice in Paris.

We might be more but also less concrete than Crary. We understand sleep as the site of dreams. There is a beautiful and not too well known film by Werner Herzog, *Where the Green Ants Dream* (1984), which shows the native Australians featured in the movie needing to conceive their children in their sleep and dreams, so that they can be born. In the paper you mention, we discuss sleep, dreams, technology, labor, and the mimeograph. We depart from the twin brothers Hypnos and Thanatos, Greek divinities of Sleep and Death respectively. While Thanatos was childless, Hypnos was a prolific father of one thousand children: the Dreams. We also discuss the ambivalent position of Marx concerning technology, the fondness of William Morris for manual labor, and Heidegger, who, in “The Question Concerning Technology,”⁷ states that the worst possible way to approach technology is to perceive it as neutral, as this makes us particularly blind to it. We also discuss Heidegger’s *alētheia* and link this back to Hypnos, the Dreams, and the importance of memory. Unlike Heidegger, who understands *alētheia* as disclosure, we highlight the fact that the Ancient Greek word for truth literally means not to forget (*a* being the privative element and *lēthē* meaning forgetfulness). Could we say, then, that truth for the Greeks was memory? As we know, the Greek divinity of memory was the mother of the Muses, Mnemosyne. So, all these connections enable us to speak of the importance of memory and history, together with the relationship between art and technology. There would be many more things to develop about the paths of thought we try to open up in this paper.

7 Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, William Lovitt (Introduction, Eng. Transl.), New York / London, Garland Publishing, Inc., 1977 [original ed.: “Die Frage nach der Technik”, in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Pfullingen, Günther Neske, 1954], 4.

We, however, do not think of our work as being openly political. By being openly political, you can actually be less political sometimes, and art that claims to be apolitical can in reality be very political. We do not see why we would not take someone like Jeff Koons as a seriously political artist. The fact that his work has a high value in the art market makes him only more political.

It is difficult for us to think about cause-effect when it comes to art. We hope that our work will prompt people to think and to feel. This all depends on becoming aware of the agency that each one of us has. If asking questions is to be openly political, then this is what our work is.

We will be presenting our next project in the very interesting context of Barents Spektakel, an amazing festival taking place in Kirkenes, on the border between Norway and Russia. Our project, entitled *The Russians Did It*, attempts to ask a question relating to Norway’s complicated relationship with its neighbour Russia. This project centers on a historical figure, a woman called Ellisif Wessel, who lived in Kirkenes in the turn of the 19th and the 20th century. She made Kirkenes into a hub for Communists during the time before the Soviet Revolution. She wrote, translated, and smuggled political literature in fish cans. We trace a line starting with Wessel, passing through the partisans and the Soviet Army liberation of Norway from Nazi occupation, that ends with today’s border tensions between Norway and Russia. This all sounds very politically loaded, but we do not want to persuade anyone of anything. We believe that it is important to ask questions, in this case, including why Norway has been so reticent to admit that liberation.

– Zanna Gilbert. The members of your collective hail from different cities. How does this internationalism impact upon your work together?

– **Alt Går Bra.** We don't think too much about that. But it certainly must be playing a role. Since our projects usually deal with history and with people, it is easier to work in the countries we are from. The connection is stronger and there is usually a deeper understanding and accountability when you belong to a place. We are interested in how cosmopolitanism is related to Romanticism. And how could cosmopolitanism have been conceived at the very heart of Classical Athens, when Socrates was still alive. Our project on the acanthus touches upon this issue. Perhaps one of the most cosmopolitan and duplicated elements in art, the acanthus leaf is ubiquitous in ornamental architecture. The Greeks went from the Egyptian palmette and lotus to the acanthus, but the properly Greek element entered the system only in the Hellenistic period. Isn't it interesting? And isn't it amazing that we are today surrounded by these inconspicuous leaves that we hardly notice but that interpellate us every day from the heights of ceilings, columns, and cornices? Early next year, we will be doing a two-month residency in Rome to develop this project about the acanthus. We believe that tracing the history of this leaf can lead us to a deeper understanding of important political issues of today, which means a deeper understanding of Romanticism and Classicism, and of course of Cynicism and its blend with Stoicism. And then there is the anecdote that so many artists throughout history felt they needed to depict: the meeting of Diogenes of Sinope (or Diogenes the Cynic) with Alexander, including the very cynical portrait by Edwin Landseer. The acanthus is a privileged locus of contention that, in our view, has been overlooked. So, our project aims to make the acanthus more visible.

– **Zanna Gilbert.** The complexity of the machines we now use to publish and share information means the majority of users don't understand, don't want to understand, how

these machines work. There is a sort of continuum of the technologization of printing machines where they become indecipherable to the average user, mostly with the introduction of the photocopier, and later computerized technology. What does using a hand-printing, but a mechanized method signify for you in terms of technology and labor? Is there a specificity to the mimeo in that respect?

– **Alt Går Bra.** This question summarizes, and in a way answers, much of the research we have been doing for the last five years.

There is definitely a specificity to the mimeo. In *Minima Moralia* (1951), Theodor W. Adorno conferred the status of a superhero to the mimeograph: "If the invention of the printing press inaugurated the bourgeois era, the time is at hand for its repeal by the mimeograph, the only fitting, the unobtrusive [*unauffällige*] means of dissemination."⁸ In the same context, he spoke of "barbaric asceticism" (*barbarische Askese*) as a means of resistance against both mass culture and progress in technical means in order to restore an unbarbaric condition. Consistent with this position, the book we now know as *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written with Max Horkheimer (Amsterdam, 1947), was first circulated in a mimeographed version for two years with the title *Philosophical Fragments*.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that the mimeograph fell into oblivion so quickly after having enabled the work of so many activists, writers, poets, and visual artists throughout the last century. In 2016, we published what to our knowledge is the first book of scholarly research dedicated to the mimeograph. Last year, we had the first exhibition ever dedicated to the mimeograph, showing over 200 publi-

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1951), 81-2.

cations including works by Fluxus, the Situationists International, the first fanzines from the 1930s, and activists such as the Spies for Peace. The conference we convened this year at the University of Westminster is the first of its kind devoted to our obsolete machine. The mimeograph is a fascinating subject and it is difficult for us to explain how so few people before us took an interest in it.

This year, we produced an installation at the V&A that addresses precisely the issues you bring up through these questions. With the title *Le Grand Mètre (After C  jar)*, we conceived this installation as a sort of remake in reverse of the copy art piece *Le Grand M  tre* that the French artist C  jar (Christian Rigal) showed at the Louvre Museum in the 1980s. C  jar produced his piece with an early Xerox machine, which was the technology that came to replace the mimeograph. Our installation was intended to be a *quo vadis*—where has Xerox and the digital era taken us?

We have some points of contention with Benjamin’s famous article on reproduction. Yet, he put the point we are trying to make here in an extraordinarily clear and beautiful fashion: “For the majority of city dwellers, throughout the workday in offices and factories, have to relinquish their humanity in the face of an apparatus. In the evening these same masses fill the cinemas, to witness the film actor taking revenge on their behalf not only by asserting his humanity (or what appears to them as such) against the apparatus, but by placing that apparatus in the service of his triumph.”⁹

– **Zanna Gilbert. The risograph is much**

9 “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version”, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge/London: The Belknap Press, 2008), 31.

more mechanized, are you using riso too? And what particularities do you find in that machine if so?

– **Alt G  r Bra.** As mimeograph users, Risographs seem buttonized rather than mechanized to us.

Mimeo supplies are of course out of production. We discovered that the Riso can produce stencils with similar results to mimeo electro-stencils. We then mount the Riso-produced stencils on a mimeo Gestetner header and print using the mimeo. We have never printed on a Riso.

– **Zanna Gilbert. You have said that the mimeo lies between tool and machine. Is there a forward facing and backward facing aspect to your engagement of mimeo - as a moment in time that relates both to the manual past but also to the mechanized, motorized, technologized present?**

– **Alt G  r Bra.** Bureaucratic efficiency is important for us. If we wanted to go back to the basics, we could make hectographs, the simple duplicating technique that we mentioned before. Mimeographs are a perfect means for us to ask the question about technology.

Your question says it all. The mimeo is a metaphor for this moment between the past and the future that can help us today to ask where we are going and why.

It is due to these reasons that duplicators are not an outmoded technology for us. Going back to Adorno and *Minima Moralia*, he discusses the obsolete and outmoded as a sort of fork in the road, based on a set of choices as opposed to technical evolution. The turn to digitalization was total, and led to a thorough attempt by digital companies that entered into the market in the late 70s to literally destroy the manual past. This is reflected in numerous stories we have heard of mimeographs, being thrown away fresh off the production line. A

few of the machines we own were those salvaged from the Gestetner factory following its (failed) digital transformation.

These issues are also reflected in the extent to which duplicators are excluded from our collective memory. In 2015, for instance, the Pompidou Center had a major exhibition on the Beat Generation with a large room at the entrance displaying the various machines used by the Beat poets. As in Tacitus's famous oxymoron about the conspicuity of an absence, the mimeograph was conspicuous by its absence at the exhibition.

It is interesting to retrace these historical steps. Why did we decide to take the path to digitalization? To what degree are we able to negotiate with machines today and what are the effects of rapid dematerialization?

– **Zanna Gilbert. Given the difficulty in finding the supplies needed to operate the mimeograph, how do you plan to continue this practice in the future? How do ecological considerations fit into this reflection?**

– **Alt Går Bra.** Perhaps, this is the most fun aspect of all our mimeograph practice, when chance will decide. One of our publications bears the phrase *Alea iacta est* in the front cover. This is an interesting phrase. It is saying, “There is nothing else you can do; it is already too late!” But it also can be saying, “well, there is so much you can do,” conveying almost like a feeling of relief. Even if agency is so central to our project, we understand that so many things in life are aleatory. This is why Alain Badiou's concept of the event is interesting. And this is why we do not believe that art should try to take the place of politics, as Jacques Rancière has very persuasively argued.

But to go back to your question, if we made an incredible amount of effort, we could probably restart the production of stencils. We believe that any leadership should be able to wait to be caught up by its constituency. Would it make sense to attach ourselves to this obso-

lete technology if nobody else cares about it? Maybe yes, maybe not. We do not know the answer. For now, we have the remaining stencils that are still in circulation so that we are able to ask this and other questions.

In any case, these are questions with remarkable repercussions in politics and of key importance in regards to the question of technology discussed throughout this interview. Do we deserve the technology we have today at our disposal? We mean, have we, users, worked for it or was it just parachuted onto us?

– **Zanna Gilbert. Was the example of Beau Geste Press important in the elaboration of your reflection? And if so, in which sense?**

– **Alt Går Bra.** We love the work of Beau Geste Press, but we think that they were trying to do something totally different from us. We want to think that it was only a few decades ago, but imagine how many things took place from May 68 until today! We live in a different world. And this is why it is important not to attach ourselves to the contingent, including, of course, the mimeograph and the shortage of supplies, which sooner or later should come up to a *cul de sac*.

– **Zanna Gilbert. How do you see mimeo printing in the future? Can it have a role beyond specialized artistic projects. If it is lost as a technology, what would be lost?**

– **Alt Går Bra.** Our answer to the last question is: the capacity to think. Mimeographs are from that moment when we as humanity made an important decision. In an article published in *Billedkunst* this year,¹⁰ we speak about measuring and the meaning of *metron* for the Greeks.

¹⁰ First published in Norwegian in Alt Går Bra, “Le Grand Mètre - målebåndet som læremester,” *Billedkunst*, no. 3 (2019): 105-9. Also published in Norwegian, French, and English in Alt Går Bra, “Le Grand Mètre,” *Trykksak*, no. 3 (2019): unnumbered pages. Available online <http://altgarbra.org/uploads/metronEnglish.pdf>

We recall the myth of Erysichthon. Punished with insatiable hunger, Erysichthon ends up eating everything there is to eat. The only thing left is his own flesh, which he devours, resulting in his demise.

It'd be definitely possible to restart production of mimeograph machines. In China they were still making them until very recently. We have discussed this with our friend Jonathan Gestetner, the last heir of the Gestetner family, who was running the factory himself with his brother David until they closed it down in the 1980s. The Gestetners did not believe in the digital. They stayed in the mechanical era and Ricoh bought them up.

We would like to close with a testimonial by Michael Laird, one of the former Gestetner factory workers we interviewed during our field work in London:

My first job was at Gestetner in 1980 until 1982. It was a short period but very memorable.

I was the 'company writer' and wrote the brochures, training films, speeches, press releases, etc. The company's centenary was during this time. Although I was extremely junior, I spent a lot of time in the company of senior figures because of my role. I used to go and take my briefs from those in the 'silver mile' (senior management) and the 'golden mile' (board of directors). Between each was a huge area of secretarial support.

Much of my work was involved in the company museum, which included a lot of the Raymond Loewy design work on 'streamlining', as well as the original stencil process technology which was revolutionary in its day. Gestetner modernised its process repeatedly - but it was always rooted in mechanics and wet ink print media.

In many places, particularly those without power, the Gestetner machine was a real revolutionary force, enabling

the local production of pamphlets quickly and cheaply in repressed political situations.

I was acutely aware that the Gestetner technology was about to be completely overwhelmed by new technology. I particularly recall David Gestetner asked me to make a display for the canteen showing how many parts were in a Gestetner machine versus a contemporary Canon photocopier. (I have no idea what point he was hoping to make, but I think he was proud of the engineering prowess in Tottenham).

The display was cancelled when there wasn't enough space to show all the Gestetner machine's parts (most made in the factory itself), while the Canon machine only filled two boards. The message of the future was stark and profound. Zips and buttons.

I recall the factory was amazing though—metal billets were delivered at one end and completed machines left at the other. The foundry press was like a steel mill. It was a complete community. Everything was in-house, onsite. My own area was next to the art studio where a dozen graphic artists worked full time. In addition to all the artwork, the studio also did birthday and marriage posters and banners, and caricature leaving cards for staff. The social club had at least two full size snooker tables.