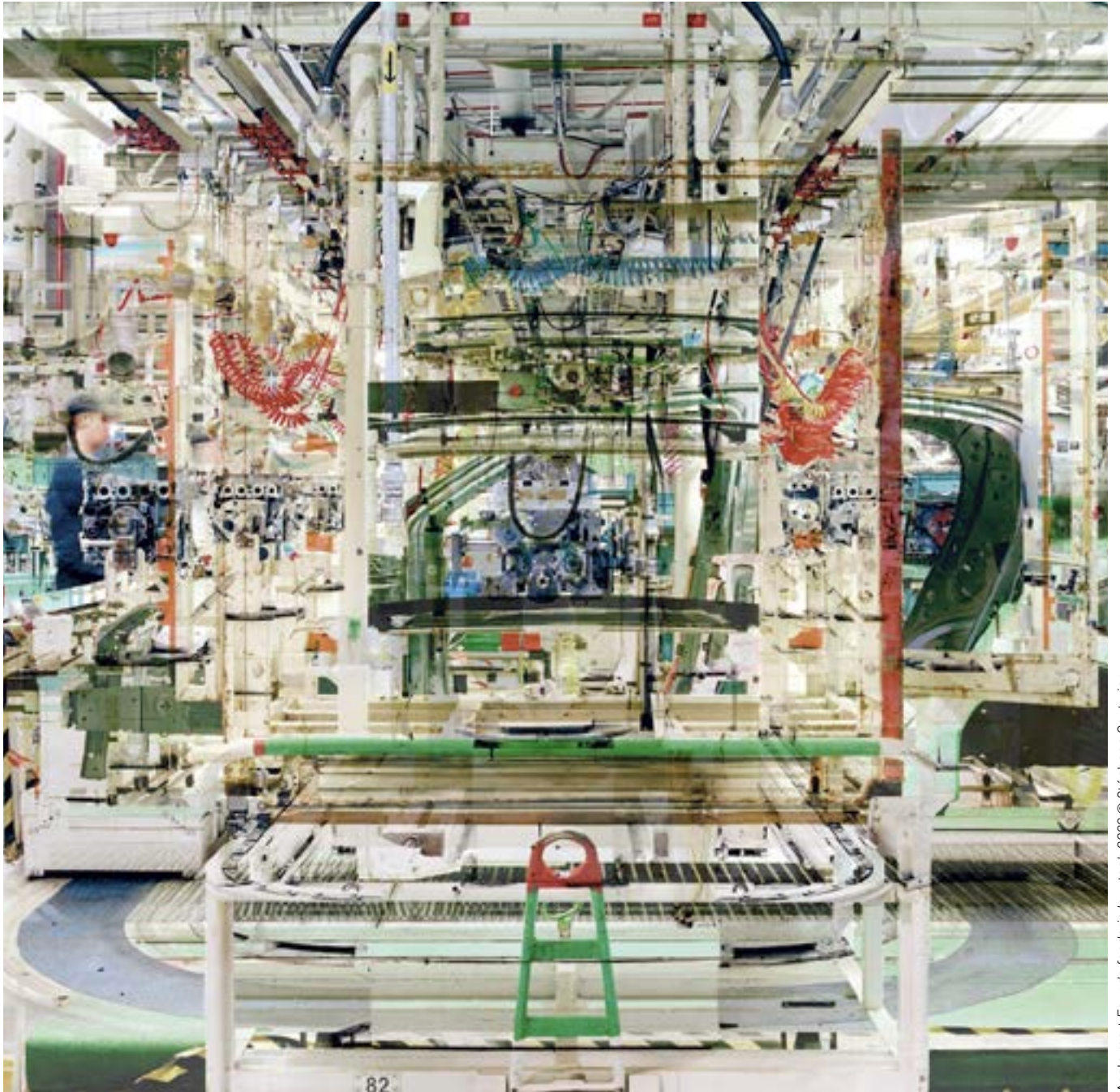




centre for innovation  
and design  
at Grand-Hornu



Angle mort Four de fonderie low-tech 2022 © Stéphane Coururier

press  
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# **AUTOFICTION**

## **A BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTOMOBILE AS AN OBJECT**

Curator and designer: Olivier Peyricot

**06.10.24 → 16.02.25**

## INTRODUCTION

The automobile is an unusual object, one that imposes its own crazy infrastructure on the world, as well as shaping the landscape and the atmosphere just as much as our imaginations: an object found in the blind spot of our day-to-day lives. More than 1.2 billion automobiles are on the roads around the world today. Presented in 2022 at the Cité du design during the 12<sup>th</sup> Saint-Étienne International Design Biennial, the exhibition *Autofiction* has been adapted to take into account the most recent developments in the issues surrounding automobiles for its latest incarnation at the CID.

The automobile is much more than a collection of thousands of different parts: as its automation continues, it is becoming more like a digital device every day, devouring data, recording and describing our environment. Its appetite for resources, both digital and physical, is nothing new: ever since it was invented, minerals and fossils have been mined to produce it, natural resources that are finding it harder and harder to cope with its widespread development. *Autofiction* presents a subjective, slightly embarrassing and often taboo biography of this object that now more than ever before is responsible for creating artificial, systemic, enormous and all-encompassing environments. *Autofiction* tells the story of the controversies rumbling away among designers and creators, thanks to three complementary biographical strands.

Part one is dedicated to the automobile as a four-wheeled smart electronic device. Automated, signal-receiving digital objects, today's cars produce a description of our environments and of ourselves that consolidates their quality as a connected object, a system object. So, in the 1970<sup>s</sup>, the Ant Farm group's Media Van captured recordings from the areas that it travelled through and the individuals it met, before reproducing them inside the same van on California's university campuses. More recently, Olivier Bosson and Nicolas Gourault's films raise questions about the setbacks faced by self-driving cars, shedding light on how fragile automated systems can be. While Didier Faustino's device for exploring dead architecture and Camille Ayme's California City tell us about a modern world in ruins, Degoutin & Wagon's robots remind us of our status as mobile animals. Benedikt Gross and Joey Lee's vehicle-as-a-device lets us "see things like AI" to understand technology from the inside.

Part two features a short fossilised biography of the automobile, before opening up to the broader theme of the modern issues relating to extraction. They may be championed by industry, but electric solutions are not the only option: we can reduce size and consumption as the electric Microlino has done, make vehicles lighter, focus on metabolism as the energy source for pedal-powered vehicles combined with electrical assistance as Canyon does, or we can turn cars into part of our heritage, either through local adaptations (use and maintenance), proposed here by Toyota with their multi-purpose IMV-0, or by retrofitting cars, like Pierre Gonalons' R5 Diamant for Renault: the possibilities are endless. However, exploiting resources to keep on producing more ways of travelling is a rather dramatic approach, as demonstrated by Reporterre journalist Célia Izoard and photographer Benjamin Bergnes and their work on the Bou Azzer mines in Morocco, or Camille Ayme and her work on recycling cars at scrap yards. For his part, Belgian artist Eric Van Hove draws on the savoir-faire of Moroccan craftsmen to remind us that car manufacturing started out as a craft, and could become one once again.

The third and final part of *Autofiction* opens up new narratives for the automobile. These stories come from artists and designers from Wolfsburg in Germany after the Dieselgate crisis; from Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of the Congo where the industry of finding rare metals for electric vehicles is having devastating consequences on local populations; from Cuba where technological disobedience is facilitating a fragile form of survival; or from France, where designer-ceramicists are drawing on the automobile's past as a new resource. By sharing these imaginative new technical ideas, dreamt up by amateurs, we encourage a broad audience to explore what could be a technical democracy, thus reviving the notion of the automobile as a popular object.

## OUTSIDE

By applying these principles of getting members of public involved in the debate on the future of the automobile, Mathilde Pellé and Arthur Pocheron, both designers, are presenting the results of two workshops focusing on existing vehicles. They look at this heritage from the perspective of care and reduction. These workshops involve students from the Lycée Provincial Hornu-Colfontaine and the Institut Saint-Luc Tournai.

## EVENT

Through film, director Olivier Bosson presents *3 morts brutales (3 brutal deaths)*, a talk/performance that accompanies the exhibition *Autofiction*, based on the accident involving a self-driving Uber car that caused the death of Elaine Herzberg. The perfect opportunity to really reflect on how engineering produces autonomous systems that fall down when they come across the unexpected

## FIVE KEY WORKS IN THE *AUTOFICTION* EXHIBITION

### Epistolary GPS

At the beginning of the last century, maps were fairly incomplete, roads weren't numbered on them and signs were virtually non-existent. To make car travel easier, Michelin started publishing its red guide in 1900. It was given out free of charge and provided "all the information that might be useful to a driver travelling in France to fill up their car, carry out repairs, find somewhere to stay and eat". In 1908, André Michelin set up an office in Paris, the Bureau des Itinéraires, to accompany the guide. For more than twenty years, he would personally answer motorists' questions about journeys in France and Europe by letter. They would receive an itinerary in the post detailing the roads that they should take, as well as any interesting things they might come across along the way.

### Computer / Commuter

The C5 Sinclair represents a turning point in understanding the future of mobility. Sir Clive Sinclair was a successful English entrepreneur specialising in computing and electronics in the 1980s. Ahead of his time by some 30 years, he made the daring connection between "computers" and "commuters" with his electric C5 tricycle, identifying a link that Google would seize upon in 2010 with its Google car, a combination of computational logic and managing interurban commuting. By attempting to open up the sprawling urban periphery with a lightweight, electric means of transport, he was trying to bridge the gap between infrastructure and an object with a semi-domestic design. This was designer Gus Desbarats' first project after leaving the Royal College of Art, and it was he who gave it the look of an unusually sized model. The innovation clearly lay in the approach to commuting, bound up with the inventor's computing world.

### Artisan composite

The automobile is a composite of materials and know-how, brought together in an industrial form, and sometimes even going so far as being fully automated. In this world, rendered invisible yet constantly evolving, Eric van Hove compares the arts and crafts approach that still exists in Morocco, with the avalanche of second-hand European cars, used and damaged objects, broken down into spare parts but with considerable added value: this comparison gives rise, in his words, to "a living socio-economic sculpture", which the artist has built on to attempt to bring about "a renaissance of an artisan approach in the post-Ford 21st century".

### Spare parts

In order to make vehicle fleets cleaner, when they have come to the end of their life cars are replaced with cleaner - electric or hybrid - models with either a scrappage or a conversion incentive. The side effect of this is that a large amount of automobile waste is generated. In order to make use of these resources, Nathan Cussol has come up with the idea of a more circular alternative to the automotive industry with a local slant. So he designs standard, streamlined components for retrofitting (converting the existing wheel base into an electric version) commonplace models (like the Clio), so that they are once again suitable for day-to-day use.

### Mechanical Darwinism

"In the late 60s, the USSR government started looking for a Western European car capable of surviving the barbarity of Slavic *autobahns* and becoming the ultimate flagship Soviet family car. The Moskvitch experiment had quite frankly been a disaster, and after trying out a number of candidates, they finally found a winner: the Fiat 124. It might have been a magnificent car, but Russian engineers had to modify more than just one or two little details (engine, brakes, suspension...) before it could be declared suitable for the rugged Soviet landscape. After a commercial agreement was signed to allow industrial cooperation between Lada and Fiat, 1970 saw the birth of the now legendary VAZ-2101, or Zhiguli, or Lada 1200." This is curator Daleysi Moya's introduction to Ezequiel O. Suarez's 100 collages of Ladas: the Lada that finally arrived in Cuba at the beginning of the 1980s continues to evolve, faced with the Cuban habit of technological disobedience, against the backdrop of the island's embargo. The automobile is a more systemic object than ever, crossing continents, modified by geopolitics to arrive at a socio-political reappropriation of its technical dimension.

*Itinerary Office Michelin*  
Poster, 1923

© L' Aventure Michelin Collection



*C5 Sinclair*

Creator: Sir Clive Sinclair,  
designer: Gus Desbarats.  
Sinclair Research, 1985.  
Single-seater electric tricycle,  
250W electric engine, 12V battery



Eric van Hove  
*Untitled 2 Garage Verona 2020*  
© Bard El Hardag



Nathan Cussol  
*Ni Fast Ni Furious 2022*  
*(Neither Fast, nor Furious)*  
Industrial Design Master's project,  
ENSCI-Les Ateliers, 2023  
© Véronique Huyghe



Ezequiel O. Suárez,  
*Ladas* (joven negro con mentón),  
collages, 2004-2015]



Frédéric and Tom Danos  
*Uber Scotch*, 2021  
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**CID - CENTRE D'INNOVATION ET DE DESIGN au Grand-Hornu**

Site du Grand-Hornu  
Rue Sainte-Louise 82  
B-7301 Hornu

+32 (0)65 65 21 21  
info.cid@grand-hornu.be

**www.cid-grand-hornu.be**

 cidgrandhornu  
 cidgrandhornu

**PRÉSIDENTE**

Fabienne Capot

**DIRECTRICE DU CID**

Marie Pok

**SERVICE DE LA COMMUNICATION**

Massimo Di Emidio  
+32 (0)65 61 39 11  
massimo.di\_emidio@hainaut.be

**CONTACT POUR LA PRESSE**

Sophie Carrée PR  
Photo : [sophiecarree.be/press](mailto:sophiecarree.be/press)  
+32 (0)2 346 05 00  
[press@sophiecarree.be](mailto:press@sophiecarree.be)  
[www.sophiecarree.com](http://www.sophiecarree.com)

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Every day from 10 AM until 6 PM, except Mondays.  
The Grand-Hornu is closed on 24, 25, 31st December and 1st January.

The office can be reached during weekdays from 8 AM to 4.30 PM.

**ADMISSION FEE**

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- Group rates (minimum 15 ppl.): €6
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- Free entry on the first Sunday of the month
- Free guided tour from Tuesday to Friday at 3.30 PM, Saturday at 11 AM and 3.30 PM, Sunday at 3 PM and 4.30 PM
- Audio-guides for the historic site: €3  
(FR / DUTCH / GERMAN / ENGL / IT / SP)

Free guided tours for individuals

- From Tuesday to Saturday at 11 AM for the historic site, at 3:30 PM for the design exhibition
- Sunday at 3 PM for the historic site, at 4.30 PM for the design exhibition.

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