

Interview:
Jule Reuter with Aleksander Komarov
December 2009 - February 2010

Jule Reuter:

Your video work "Estate" from 2008 deals with the evident dominance of economics since the financial crisis, and its interrelation with other spheres of society using Germany and Russia as examples. What determined your choice of these two locations? Do they represent in general the "first" and "second" world and their relation to each other; or are there more personal reasons that have to do with your origins from Belarus, a post-socialist country, and your current residence in Rotterdam and Berlin?

Aleksander Komarov:

When you ask about the choice of location, I would say that I see location as a source. In the same way one might read an entire book in order to find the passages that work for your theme, I travel to a place and while I'm there I take stock of all the things related to my current subject to find the images for the film. The starting point for my film 'Estate' was the fairytale. This fairytale comes from the tales of the miners in the Ural Mountains. Marking the border between Europe and Asia, the Urals are the oldest mountain chain in Russia and are well-known as a source of precious stones and metals, including gold and copper ores. The most famous character from these stories is the Mistress of Copper Mountain, a protector of gems and stones in the Urals. The choice to go to Yekaterinburg was there from the very beginning.

Frankfurt came into the picture afterwards: I read in the financial news about speculation on moving the headquarters of Deutsche Bank in Frankfurt to London, and that the Frankfurt "twin towers" (the building has been a popular backdrop in print media and television as a symbol of the German economy) will be closed and the art collection will be relocated by 2010. Imagining the empty towers from inside, and at the same time being confronted with the impossibility of filming or even seeing them empty, I wondered how the media shaped my imagination. In the end, I filmed in a show room in Frankfurt, which has view onto the Deutsche Bank Towers.

In the film, the notion of value passes from material value to ideal value systems. The Ural area is as well known for a seemingly endless capacity of resources as Frankfurt is known for its high density of bank buildings and the stock exchange. Economics has interested me for some time. For me it is rather personal issue. Because of my migratory lifestyle I have learnt that identity is directly related to economics. There were no thoughts about the first and second world, but I would be curious to discuss with you your thoughts about the terms in relation to today.

JR:

"First", "second" and "third" world are terms from the political context of the Cold War which, although they are less frequently used today, still codify a ranking of the world order. My question aimed to find out to what extent you wanted to draw attention in "Estate" to the systematic connection between spaces (here, raw material production, there sales and production of value) within the global economy. You mention that as a migrant, you discovered that identity is closely connected to economy. Could you be more specific and say to what extent these experiences had some influence on the film?

AK:

In "Estate" the image of production of value is related to the economy of the places I chose to film. The ideologies powered by the government cannot be blend out, but as well were not communicate in an outspoken way. In the city of Asbestos, which is situated in the

Ekaterinburg region, I had a guide, a teacher from the local school. She explained the history of the city to me and we went up onto the platform where I could look out over the excavation site of asbestos. It was an incredible experience: the grey landscape sculpted into the earth, where big trucks and trains were scaled down to miniatures, repeating the same movement over and over again. I realized the political implications of the name that was given to the city – Asbestos: it expresses the duration of its existence and its relation to larger economic structures. The guide told me people used to celebrate weddings in front of the mine. I filmed her there, standing without speaking a word as if she embodied the production of asbestos. If she had spoken, we would have been looking at her, but as she stays silent I get the feeling she was looking at us. She looks through the camera to an unknown spectator.

The issue of migration, as migration of people, as an economic factor is not part of the content of “Estate”. But certainly the displacement of material, from location to location, from value to value and therefore the economics of displacement, plays a role in my film. Actually, the issue of migration is very much part of my personal life. My place of birth and nationality, as well as where I currently live, play a vital role in the organization of the financing of my films.

JR:

In the film, you join together very different areas under the heading of global value production – simply put, those are raw material production, the financial market and art. In doing so, you choose a fairly calm narration, structuring the film material into four chapters which are reminiscent of a literary form. This creates space, I find, for observation and concentration. Is this an intentional ‘anti-concept’ to all the nervousness and confusion?

AK:

I chose subjects that are, as you say, the focus of much discussion usually related to moral issues. At the Deutsche Boerse in Frankfurt, I recorded precisely one day in the everyday routine at the stock exchange. During my filming, I focused on the place itself, as a medium where everything discloses the spirit of value production, both in the location and with its workers. The persistent clicking sound of numbers establishes the omnipresence of Dax, FTSE 100, Nikkei 225 – the “global” stock market index of large companies regardless of where they are based or traded. At first the clicking sound stands for the change in value, but the numbers sometimes do not change and yet the clicking continues.

When you deal with issues like trade or value production as an artist, I think first about my public, and I am sure that it is very aware of political themes. These subjects are definitely part of daily discussion, so that information or content doesn’t need to be added on my part. The actual political act that I exercise with the work is to point out that the more nervousness exists around these subjects, the more the subjects stay excited and confused.

There is one reference to the book in the film by dividing it into four chapters. Another one is by filming most scenes with a static camera. It allows a more concentrated way of observing and layering.

JR:

As you mention the political intention of your work, I’d very much like to go into the third chapter in more detail in which you question the role of art in this context. You point to the tight interconnectedness, albeit a very discreetly managed one, between the financial market and the art market and the related art collection activities of banks and companies. The “discretion” even goes as far that the questions you asked Deutsche Bank on their art concept Art at Works were not answered. For me, your film brings across that art today has become an extremely important part of the cultural representation of banks but that their critical potential at the same time is not welcome. What possibilities do you foresee for yourself as an artist to meet these issues or react to them?

AK:

As an artist, one's work value is not determined by one's economy of production, or the other way around. And because of this, it is important to maintain a certain critical distance towards value related to the modes of production in contemporary art.

The production of an art object, the surroundings that facilitate its value, and these methodologies seem to fit perfectly well together with the bank's desire for continuity of value. Deutsche Bank was actually one of the first companies in the 1970s which began to place large scale works of art in offices and conference rooms; in this concept, entitled 'Art at Work' by the Deutsche Bank, aesthetic resources of the artworks are not only related to questions of representation and art investment but also become a resource of contemporary mythology for the employees. When an artwork joins the collection, a material value is given to that work: where to store it, when and where to show it, to whom to give rights of reproduction. The bank becomes a producer of the external value of the art object and therefore collecting is a subject that is itself a complex and rich economy. In chapter three of my film, there are only two components of the triumvirate of art: there is a voice-over about "Art at Works" concept, and the working space for art, but the art object itself is missing.

JR:

You touch upon the absence of art; there is a discussion about art and the space or context it is shown in. That leads me to the motif of travelling in "Estate". There is an artist who visits locations that are far apart, observes, draws his own conclusions, and thinks laterally. To what extent does the search for new spaces of art activity connect to this value cycle?

AK:

The film "Estate" does not actually deal with a personal motive concerning the value of art. The work takes a more methodological approach, documenting a certain system of value creation. You ask about my personal search within the system of value creation, and I think that "Estate" actually refuses a personal statement on this subject. It was important for me to keep it away from my own life. And at the same time, I think that during the process of making "Estate", it became an inevitable subject for a new body of work, which is this book. Therefore, the images used in this book are not illustrations of the film "Estate" acquire another value through the relocation into another materiality.

JR:

"Estate" is your fourth film. Is there an inner connection to other works such as "See You in Disneyland" and "On Translation: Transparency / Architecture Acoustique"? Both of these films to a certain extent pursue the change in the significance of aesthetic concepts as a political expression against the background that a country wishes to redefine itself, and so space, symbols and signs disappear and others are created.

AK:

Both of the films you mention deal with a certain locality and its architectural condition, questioning meanings of labour, value systems and spatial inscriptions. The moment of construction or deconstruction perhaps builds the connection between all the works. "See you in Disneyland" was my first film. It witnesses the deconstruction of the Palast der Republik in Berlin in 2006. The film begins with an extract of a Dutch radio documentary, which reports about the night of 9 November 1989, recorded next to the Palast der Republik. The recording of the people's celebration mood and euphoria is collaged with images of the deconstruction of the Palast der Republik. The filming took equally place at night. "See you in Disneyland" points to an actuality made by media for a certain territory at a certain moment in time and renders it absurd. In 'On Translation Transparency / Architecture acoustique' I emphasize on the articulated

spectacle of transparency, a spectacle equally provoked by the mass media and the recipients. Translation in my film refers to the interpretation of meaning of one language into another, here into the language of film. The material itself is transparent and can only be consumed by means of projection. The montage then collides different shots, which I understand as thesis and antithesis. "On Translation Transparency / Architecture acoustique" reflects on the modern, Western urge for transparency – as if one could endow power with good spirit by building houses of glass. In the film, elements of nature work against human forces, and a team of window cleaners are constantly working on keeping the glass clean and preserving the illusion of an immaterial wall between power and the world.

When working on "Estate", I followed different manifestations of value systems – like the mythical transfigured ideas of mine workings at the Urals – in order to go further into a human desire to abstract, dematerialize, obscure possession. All my film works are filmed with a reserved view on their subjects and offer the viewer space to take position in the political circus of power, labour and estate. The films could be seen as "essays about who is in charge, who is in and out, who awakens desires, who knows – without explaining, judging or commenting on it"¹.

JR:

Where will you go next in your artistic development?

AK:

Cape Canaveral...

¹ Renate Wagner for eflux film screening at The Building, Berlin, February 2009