

Aleksander Komarov's Estate: Where is Art?

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Driven by questions about the connections between resources, production, values and the status of art, Aleksander Komarov undertook a journey to the opencast mines of the Ural Mountains and to the skyscrapers of Frankfurt am Main. The resulting video "Estate" reproduces the reticent and inquisitive observations of a contemporary investigator. In four chapters, Komarov examines the relationship between economics and art. He passes his knowledge, but also his questions, on to the viewer, creates experiential spaces for others and puts his trust in visual and conceptual analogies.

Looked at in advance, the planned journey seems like a hypothetical expedition into the settings of Pavel Bazov's Ural fairytales, which are familiar to everyone who grew up in the Soviet Union. They are tales of paradisiacal landscapes, enterprising miners and rich geological resources, which are protected by the "Mistress of the Copper Mountain"¹. The stories, which were published by Bazov in the 1930's, are based on traditional fables. Typical for this time, however, they also contain a utopic vision of a happy and untroubled life shared by all the simple people of the Urals.

What Komarov found there was a combination of entropy, ruin and dogged perseverance. The abandoned industrial sites are left open and derelict, whilst new sites are opened up next to them. Ecological concerns don't seem to be of great relevance. The ultra-modern fears of an imminent exhaustion of natural resources² seem like nothing but intellectual rubbish when viewed in the light of this vigorous activity. And those that hope to find in Komarov's film an interpretive proximity to representations of the alienation of man in an industrially defined space, like those found in Antonioni's "Red Desert" of 1964, stand corrected. The people of the area connect the powerful industrial landscapes and the smoking chimneys, the deep mines and enormous machinery with a feeling of historical and cultural belonging. A teacher, who peacefully looks into the camera while she talks about this, is standing on the viewing platform of an asbestos mine. Wedding parties come here after the registry office to take commemorative photos. School groups also come here. In handcraft classes they use asbestos fibre to create artistic place mats with floral decorations. The identity of the entire region, its self-concept and pride, is based on the mining of precious stone, gold and minerals. The local patriotism is promoted by the state and encouraged in the media by connecting it to episodes from the world of important, international events.³ Thinking back here to the rotating stone with the veins of gold that Komarov placed at the beginning of the film, we realise that the artist has provided us with an appropriate symbol for our present perception of the Urals. The stone stands for the complete dominance of industry, the exploitation of natural resources. Simultaneously it acts as a reference to the now defunct modernism, which connected a belief in the new man and in a better society with the esoteric and mystical concepts of the crystalline or of the "philosopher's stone".

Anyone who starts to investigate interrelationships in the current economic system will automatically include reflections on the nature of the financial market in their research. Ever since Marx, every analysis of capitalism, even the less serious among them, has exploited a confrontation between the real-world production of material wealth and the virtual trade in stocks and shares. In times of economic crisis, this often leads to moral judgements: the example of the "good" productive capitalists, who create jobs, is emphasised, while the "bad" financial investors, who with their virtual trading throw society into chaos and bring it to the brink of destruction, are scorned. Aleksander Komarov wanted his images of the

Frankfurt stock exchange to be value-free. It is exactly this “unintentionality”, this aim of capturing a normal, unstaged day at the stock exchange, which provides the film with its most comical episodes. The viewer watches with amusement as a stock exchange reporter prepares for her TV appearance - how she practises her mimic, her serious yet friendly report and the smile that appears in the middle of the last sentence to be wiped off in the exact moment that the last syllable has been spoken. The actions of a further protagonist seem absurd, who, before taking each step, throws a folder onto the floor in front of her, which she then walks on. Descriptions of the stock exchange as a place of unreality and fiction, as a “spectacle of speculation”⁴ can only be corroborated by such images. The scene in its entirety is, however, principally dominated by those images which, despite their frequent repetition, always manage to captivate anyone visiting or observing the stock exchange: brokers crouched in front of monitors, surveillance cameras, the click-clack of the changing prices.

In the language habitually used to describe both art and economics (or the fictional economics often practised on the stock exchange), phrases and concepts that include the word “value” are frequently heard. We talk about projected value appreciation, about peak value and about market value. “Can the connection between art and business create added value?” an internet business magazine asks.⁵ Artists constantly experience how the value of their work can be transformed, above all when the work becomes part of the collection of a large bank or insurance company. In this instance, as the British art historian Julian Stallabrass has dryly concluded, “both brands”, the brand of the artist and that of the business partner, enter into an “image enhancing and consequently profit enhancing” relationship with each other.⁶ How can an artist define their personal role and their artistic identity against a background of a culture characterized by the overwhelming dominance of economic strategies and structures? The position of the artist has seldom been so personally instable and seldom so polemically discussed and contradictorily defined by the various intellectual disciplines. Boris Groys provocatively states that the artist has degenerated into a consumer, borrowing images and objects from popular culture for the “creation of personal spaces” in a method comparable to shopping.⁷ The classification of artists as “itinerant producers” (Toni Negri⁸) emphasises not only the functional element of art but also reveals the determining conditions of the artist’s practice: a drifting from one project to the next, with an almost total loss of self-determination, and with all the consequences that come with it. Because this flexibility demands a melting of the boundaries between the work place and the private realm, discipline to the point of self-exploitation and permanent availability.

In light of this background, Aleksander Komarov found the Deutsche Bank’s collection concept “Art at Work” particularly problematic. As a superlative “Corporate Collector” - in this category the Deutsche Bank has been collecting art the longest, possesses one of the largest collections worldwide and its most well known concept “Art in the Workplace” has been most frequently imitated - the Deutsche Bank sends a signal to society, a potent public declaration of its conception of art. If you analyse the phrase “Art at Work”, you become aware of the polarising nature of the concept. Following this concept, a bank employee at work will be presented with an aesthetic object, which has entertainment value and can incidentally broaden his horizons. While over here share prices are being analysed and customers are having appointments, over there hangs an exceptionally auratic piece, which has emerged out of a genuine interiority. This has nothing to do with the reality of societal relationships (in artist circles?).

In the course of his research for the film, Komorov received an advertising portfolio with information about the Deutsche Bank’s engagement with art, in which he learned that the corporation’s collection is being managed under a new guiding motto: ArtWorks. The elucidation of this altered concept is reproduced in his film. While the text is read out by a narrator, the viewer looks out of the panorama window of a stylish and artistically furnished hotel (this is an office

building for rent, isn't it?) room onto the two towers of the Deutsche Bank. When we choose to ignore the self-congratulatory exaltation, we hear an essentially honest corporate statement. It speaks of commissions given to artists, who "react to the architectural and communicative conditions on site", and of art as "an investment in the future". The ambiguous combination "ArtWorks" reveals that which has long determined the connection between business and art: art can really work. It works for the image and prestige enhancement of this corporation, or for that of the Austrian energy company EVN-AG whose collection catalogue is cited in the film in the form of images, or also for that of the art-friendly hotel, from which Komarov was filming (Is this really a hotel, darling?). We can eagerly await the next evolution in this concept of exhibiting art for representative purposes. Because the value and significance of a corporate passion for art isn't equal to the sum of the values of the exhibited works. And their staging in generous empty spaces has become inflationary: it is not just the influential corporations that are masters in this, but also the insignificant restaurants or the owners of lofts.

Levelling and assimilation appears once again in the closing images to Aleksander Komarov's film, in which he lets the shining surfaces from the emerging Ural metropolis Yekaterinburg and those of Frankfurt slide into each other. The world is globalized - how pleasant that the art world meets the challenges arising out of this with humour: "Art at Works" is the name chosen by a recently established group of curators from Italy.

¹ See e.g. "Die Herrin des Kupferberges" (The Mistress of the Copper Mountain) by Pavel Bazov and Margarete Spady. Berlin, Aufbau-Verlag, 1961; "Die Malachitschatulle" (The Malachite Casket) von Pavel Bazov und Maximilian Schick. Moscow, Verlag für Fremdsprachige Literatur, 1955

² See here the 1974 essay from the architect Yona Friedman "From Affluence to Poverty".

For Friedman "the most striking historical feature of the last half of our century was the sudden recognition of our poverty" - as a result of our squandering of the "rich reserves of energy and raw materials". Yona Friedman: "Vom Überfluß zur Armut" (From Affluence to Poverty). In: "Machbare Utopien. Absage an geläufige Zukunftsmodelle" (Feasible Utopias. A Rejection of Prevalent Models of the Future). Frankfurt/Main, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1977, pp. 183-202

³ Metaphors and symbols from Basov's fairytales are often exploited for political purposes. Here an anecdotal account of Russian-German relations in 2003: at a meeting in Yekaterinburg, Vladimir Putin presented the German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder with an artistic statuette of the "Mistress of Copper Mountain". Although she fiercely defended the entrance to the treasure, she would open the doors for the virtuous (in this case: investors from Germany). When Gerhard Schröder left the statuette standing on the lectern Putin remarked that Germany was squandering its riches. Hardly noticed in Germany, this episode was frequently quoted in the Russian media as a proof of national superiority.

⁴ Urs Stäheli: "Spektakuläre Spekulation" (Spectacular Speculation). Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2007, p. 115.

⁵ <http://www.perspektive-blau.de/artikel/0412b/0412b.htm>

⁶ Julian Stallabrass: Freier Handel, freie Kunst. (Free Market, Free Art) <http://www.artnet.de/magazine/features/stallabrass/stallabrass03-07-09-2.asp>

⁷ Boris Groys: Der Künstler als Konsument (The Artist as Consumer) In: Topologie der Kunst (Topology of Art). Munich, Vienna, Carl Hanser Verlag, 2003, p. 49

⁸ Toni Negri, Maurizio Lazarato, Paolo Virno: Umherschweifende Produzenten. Immaterielle Arbeit und Subversion (Wandering Producers. Immaterial Work and Subversion). Berlin, ID Verlag, 1998.