

## Boris Buden

### The View from the Scales

More than a century ago, an American doctor had tried to find a proof for the existence of the soul. Weighing people at the moment of their deaths, he established that they had lost a certain amount of weight. According to his measurements, they had lost an average of 21 grams. As a result, he concluded that this must be the weight of the human soul, which, as we know, is supposed to be immortal. The soul must then have a material dimension, and must therefore also be quantifiable. His hypothesis was, of course, quickly discredited: the recorded difference in weight, which could also be measured in animals, for example mice, was traced back to a both banal yet completely rational cause, namely the loss of fluid that happens at the moment of death. Water, and not the soul, weighed 21 grams.

Nevertheless, it still makes sense, even today, to remember this “experiment”. Despite its miserable failure, it was namely guided by logic - by a blind belief in a rationalistic, scientific jurisdiction over not just everything that actually exists, but also over everything that can be conceived or imagined. The idea that we could take the soul, that most sublime part of a human being, and toss it on the scales like a piece of meat, was far from being just the fantasy of a freak. Just the opposite. The hypothesis that the soul possessed materiality and could be mechanically quantified was absolutely in tune with the spirit of the time. This was the epoch of the first great upsurge of industrial modernism, when the belief in its unstoppable progress had not yet been tarnished by global crisis or world war. At approximately the same time, also in America, Frederick Winslow Taylor formulated his *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911), the bible of industrial rationalisation. His vision was a complete rationalisation and standardisation of physical movements, with the aim of increasing the productivity of industrial labour. This idea has a long history reaching back into the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, when, with the introduction of accountancy for the management of both material and spiritual goods, the secular trend began of the rationalisation of every domain of human existence. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, this trend continued with the intensification of disciplinary measures and surveillance methods in prisons, hospitals and military barracks (famously described in Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*), to take on in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century the form of various practices for the self-control of temporal and physical behaviour. The best example is the regulation of physical movements in gymnastics. To quote a standard work on the theme of “hygiene”, published in France in the 1880’s: “every musculoskeletal system can be trained; every pattern of movement modified, regulated”. In Taylorism, on the other hand, the rationalisation of physical movement is applied to a particular realm of commercial life, that of industrial labour. Taylor wanted to create a system, or rather an organisation, “in which man and machine are

merged into a unity of maximum output and efficiency". In short, he wanted to increase the productivity of the workers. Seen from the rival perspective of the working class lobby, however, the intention was the optimisation and maximisation of the worker's exploitation. Their physical movements were "scientifically" measured, with the aim of establishing a norm for the "appropriate daily output": "...one measures with a stopwatch the time required for every single operation/working procedure, to then try and establish the fastest method for performing it". This rationalisation of work met with resistance, however. According to Taylor, it was sabotaged by the unions. They were responsible for all the wasted energy and squandered working time. For Taylorism, therefore, the class lobby on behalf of the workers is implicitly irrational, in other words, unscientific.

In the same historical context, i.e. also in America, and also in pursuit of a radical rationalisation of industrial work, Fordism was developed. Henry Ford, who incidentally shared Taylor's animosity towards the unions and banned them in his factories, standardised the physical movements of the workers not on the level of the individual body, but in relationship to the manufacture of the final product. He divided the requisite labour into simple, discrete, single movements and had them performed by several workers in series. Thus the modern factory was born, in which the lives of the people of industrial modernism were reproduced, and which so decisively shaped the historical world of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And this, beyond any ideological or political divisions. Millions of people worked in Fordist factories in Detroit and Turin, in Nazi Germany and in the Soviet Union, in metropolises and colonies, under liberal democratic and real socialist regimes. Regardless of how much, or how little, political, individual, cultural etc. freedom they otherwise enjoyed, in the area of the material reproduction of their lives they were not master of their physical movements. These were alienated from them by a hegemonic rationality, quantified as units of energy, time or money, then standardized, to be ultimately reimposed onto them in the objectified form of mechanical labour.

This is the real historical context, in which Aleksander Komarov's "Estate" both makes sense and speaks to us as art

As we then enter the Frankfurt Stock Exchange in Komarov's "Estate", his camera behaves like the scales . It desublimates the found reality and shows it in its everyday banality. In the very place where capitalist means of production take on their most sublime form, as a trade in shares, Komarov chooses to focus on the simply terrestrial: the stock brokers sit in front of screens and chew their sandwiches, a TV journalist prepares for her live stock market report, a monotone noise signals the constant changing of numbers on the large display board etc., in short, a not particularly exciting atmosphere.

But where there's so much money to be found, art can't be far away. And, sure enough, in the neighbourhood of the stock exchange in Frankfurt we find the Deutsche Bank - world famous, not lastly, for its art collection. Art has been collected here for years, and collected under the concept: "Art at Work". This is taken to mean "Art in the Workplace", which literally means that the collected art works decorate the working spaces of this financial institution, and in doing so, as it is typically believed, can somehow refine a dry, bureaucratically alienating working atmosphere. We could choose to believe that the role of art in the work place is to impart a sublime dimension to the essentially rational and pragmatic working with money, to, as it were, elevate it artistically from the dirt of reality. Exactly the opposite is the case. It was exactly this artistic redesigning of the work place, this "going artistic", which was viewed at the time by Herbert Marcuse, in, for instance, *One Dimensional Man*, as an example of what he called repressive desublimation. Art doesn't enter the work place in order to breathe soul into it, and thus refine it. Instead, art wants to aesthetically sensualise it, to affectively charge it. Art wants to make working sexy. Why? To extend the control over the working body. It is art that now takes over the old assignment of rationalisation and standardisation, which industrial modernism once used to kick off its historical boom. Instead of engineers like Taylor, it is art that is mobilized to increase productivity, or, in other words, to increase the efficiency of exploitation. /

But here, Aleksander Komarov also takes it a step further. In "Estate" he brings to our attention a further "progression", which Deutsche Bank has in the meantime made in its conception of art collecting. The company no longer calls its collection "Art at Work", but "ArtWorks". Although the difference might not sound so dramatic - from one ambiguity: "art in the workplace" or "art while working" to another: "works of art" or "art works" - it explicitly marks the transition to a post-industrial and post-Fordist method of production. Art can now really work, and not just stimulate and monitor the working process from the outside. Art is no longer there to make working with money more efficient, it makes money itself.

The same thing can be said for the sublime. It has also become a worker.

The first part of Komarov's "Estate" undeniably evokes in us an experience of the sublime, and this in the Kantian sense: it is images of nature - the opencast mines in the Urals - which create the feeling of vastness and boundlessness. It is a vision of the inexhaustibility of natural resources, in this case, the natural reserves in the Urals, and, taken still further, of the boundlessness of nature itself, which is communicated to us by these images; in other words, exactly that feeling of exaltation, of the sublime, as defined by Kant. In addition to this, Komarov documents - to use another Kantian concept - subjective awareness, which goes beyond the sensual to attain the realm of ideas: in the transcendence of nature - in its boundlessness, which both implies the inevitability of the industrial exploitation of natural resources and provides it with ideological legitimacy -

people have found their authentic world to work and live in. In other words, it is their identity, a soul breathed in from their reality. Identity is after all nothing more than soul at work, and Komarov has exactly measured it.

See Philipp Sarasin, “Die Rationalisierung des Körpers. Über ‘Scientific Management’ und ‘biologische Rationalisierung’” (The Rationalisation of the Body. On ‘Scientific Management’ and ‘Biological Rationalisation’) in: Michael Jeismann (Ed.), *Obsessionen. Beherrschende Gedanken im wissenschaftlichen Zeitalter*, (Obsessions. Dominant Concepts in the Scientific Age) Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1995, pp. 78-116, here p. 81.

Ibid. p. 83.

Ibid. p. 86.

Ibid. p. 87.