

The quantity of labour, however, is measured by its duration, and labour-time in its turn finds its standard in weeks, days and hours. Some people might think that if the value of a commodity is determined by the quantity of labour spent on it, the more idle and unskillful the labourer, the more valuable would his commodity be, because more time would be required in its production.

Karl Marx

The price of time

Maik Schlüter

The value of a commodity is predetermined. The price of a commodity is the numerical expression of its cost; in order to own it, one has to pay the requested sum of money. Whoever can pay little or nothing, possesses little or nothing. At first glance, there seems to be no abstract perspective to the exchange of commodities made possible through money. The degree to which the individual partakes in society is determined by his bank-account balance. Whoever finds himself on the fringes of society probably chose the wrong profession or sold the service of his labour inefficiently. Social reality is interpreted as a personal reality, thus shifting political and economic responsibility into the realm of the individual's capabilities. Most people do not sell products under their name, but are forced to offer their labour anonymously. Ideally, the latter is offset through the working time actually expended. In a society of labour, the following still applies: whoever spends little time working is seen as inefficient and as withdrawing from his social responsibility; by extension, someone who works a lot is productive. Efficiency is the most valuable commodity in a society that is geared towards performance. The ideal of labour society is to sustain productivity by optimising and compressing the greatest possible number of labour segments and steps. Added together, the *quantity* and *quality* of labour produce surplus value. An ideal correlation between time, expenditure and outcome is the cause of long working hours with no detrimental effect on productivity.

Oliver Kossack's paintings from the series entitled *OK* of 2006 thwart this value hierarchy based on time by resorting to an alternative value system. Paintings that took three minutes to complete are worth no less than those executed in eleven, thirty-three or seventy-seven minutes. The paintings are priced according to size. The price is not determined by the production time

span, but rather by the works' respective sizes. However, these vary only marginally and can, thus, hardly be seen as plausible equivalents of the respective price or value. Forced to consider the external conditions of artistic production, we soon become aware of the contradictory nature of defining values. For neither the actual production time nor the material itself provide insight into how the price is determined. Kossack's *OK* series seems blatantly exemplary in terms of an efficient expenditure of labour time; whether in eleven or seventy-seven minutes, Kossack effectively produces a sellable art commodity after a comparatively short time span.

Sales are determined by demand and, on the art market, demand increases proportionately to the popularity of the artist. Ultimately, this mechanism may mean that the successful artist is free to do whatever he wants. Various contemporary artists currently pursue strategies that disclose market mechanisms while, at the same time, demonstrating that art is not only interpretable in economic terms but also implicitly relates spiritual meaning. Historic and cultural projections offer only a restricted repertoire of arguments in favour of the artwork's social legitimisation, significance and price. Just as attempts to define time solely according to the dictum of efficiency results in restricting the freedom of the acting parties, perceiving the meaning of art in purely economic terms leads to a dead end of both subject matter and spiritual effect.

Current value, exchange value, utility value, material value, monetary value, intrinsic value and social value combine to generate contradictory societal correlates. The criteria of art are only apparently different: the myth of the genius can only be sustained by postulating contradictions in terms of time and production. The uniqueness of the *œuvre* is demonstrated either by citing the artist's (period of) suffering or the works' great historic relevance. Alternatively, the genius is described in terms of incalculable moments of intuition, in which artistic output is focused as if through a burning glass. Here, the time laboriously expended to render measurable the struggle with oneself and the material of one's art stands against the temporal compression of the moment of accomplishment, in which energy bursts to the surface and is released. Materiality and skill, size and representativeness as well as resolution and relevance are usually understood as superlatives rather than terms to describe work. Oliver Kossack critiques these categories, revealing them as mere constructs so as to inquire into and comment on central

aspects of painting, thus disclosing their duplicitous nature. Not only is production time a pivotal concept in the *OK* series, but also the pictures' titles and subjects. Switching from abstract to figurative modes of representation, Kossack quotes aspects of Expressionism, Cubism or Realism, making oblique reference to figures as varied as Picasso, Schlemmer, Guston, Baselitz or Kippenberger. Without exception, these are all male 'artist heroes' whose impact and genius are founded on formal and stylistic renewal, as well as on the arcanelly exceptional standing of their *œuvres* and their status as idiosyncratic individuals and artistic personalities. They are artists who at once expose their own distress about artistic conventionality and ironically observe the rigidity of the art business. Ultimately, work and artist are reciprocal criteria in a dual relationship aiming to create artistic personalities whose creative achievements appear magnificently inevitable – and inevitably magnificent.

Kossack's quotations are never unambiguous. With both solemnity and irony, the titles of his works provoke phonetic misunderstandings to uncover existential depths and chasms. Consciously evading preparatory measures and issues related to skill and craftsmanship, the artist uses mass-produced, basic pre-stretched canvases. This seems to desecrate the lofty notion of painting and reduce it to somewhat of a hobby activity. All the same, Kossack's astute commentary on the economy of pictures and his extensive wordplay liberate the *OK* series from such trivial caricature. The artist purloins his personal labour time from a tight system of performance-oriented production. The thief profits from the things others have accumulated by siphoning off their value. However, this also activates control bodies in conformist areas of society which seek to obstruct the revaluation of existing values based on new independent rules. Kossack's art not only cites temporal factors, but also interprets the conditions and contents of production as unstable and variable quantities. His works are neither legitimised by a centuries-old tradition nor do they claim to summon unconscious powers inexorably determining their form. For a moment, the myths of generating art seem overthrown. Yet then these myths are assimilated into the outside world once again, as the works are offered for sale at ultimately payable prices.

© Maik Schlüter, 2009