



Socialism in a Coma

Double Bound Economies Reading an Archive from the GDR (1967 - 1990)

Such a meaty topic as this project conjures can best be digested slowly. Ideology is never far from the thoughts of mere mortals, yet somehow has a lot to answer for in the history of politics. Since that is a never-ending story, it tends to gather a lot of talk around itself. When art and originality are figured into the equation, things get even more complicated. Fantastically, and probably uniquely in the world, there is a bit of a treasure to be found in the enormous array of photographs taken inside the former GDR by Reinhard Mende over the course of some 30 years. The images are here to be absorbed, regardless of whether or not one decides to call them art.

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images REINHARD MENDE

Writing about an exhibition and a publication before they have even been launched, before they have materialised outside of announcements and preliminary exposés, seems counterintuitive, if not preconceived. After all, we are speaking of a form of 'visual art' here. But the praise of aesthetic experience, which curators are appointed to stage for their audiences and that supposedly mediate the artworks' original being is, in itself, the expression of a questionable preconception. What are the contemporary terms of an 'original' work of art and what influence does its being staged within an exhibition have on its originality? The question is rather, what preconceptions are we discussing, not if we are discussing preconceptions when talking about the contemporary life of visual art. Looking at the project Double Bound Economies – Photographs of the International Trade Fair in Leipzig and Industrial Operations in the GDR from 1967 to 1990, the 'originality' of a given work seems to be as much in question as the possible 'mediation' of its original being. The title evokes a specific kind of commissioned photography, one whose ideological frame, the GDR, ceased to exist over 20 years ago. But, as the use value of these images has surely vanished by now,

their chances of becoming 'art' are actually increasing. In a state of global capitalism, art as we know it is based on the institutionalisation of different copyright laws in the 18th, 19th and 20th century for its different genres, and on the subsequent distinction of its production from that of all others in a given society, through these laws. It was only in this way that 'art' could become 'original'. The rights of art, and thus the right to be an artist, largely determine the possibility and inhibition of its visibility. And this becomes especially interesting when one turns - as this project does - to a history of commissioned photography.

Original sins

So, we have not yet seen Double Bound Economies, as it will not open its doors before May (whence it will be exhibited in Leipzig until June, before travelling on to Geneva, and from there to Zurich). The project takes as its starting point the image archives of GDR industrial photographer Reinhard Mende, which consist of 16,500 medium format photographs. The research group that initiated this travelling exhibition comprises of photographic historian Estelle Blaschke, artist Armin Linke, curator Doreen Mende, and art

rm_04022_05: 05.03.1977:
Grubenlampe Zwickau (miner's
lamp), Anja and Doreen



rm_00080C_01: 08.06.1981
Zella Mehlis RG 5

Facing page clockwise:
rm_03389_11: 06.02.1975
Combine lamp

rm_04311_02: 25.10.1977
Combine Brotterode

rm_06295_06: 06.09.1983
Leipzig Autumn Fair 1983

rm_04238_09: 02.09.1977
Deutschneudorf

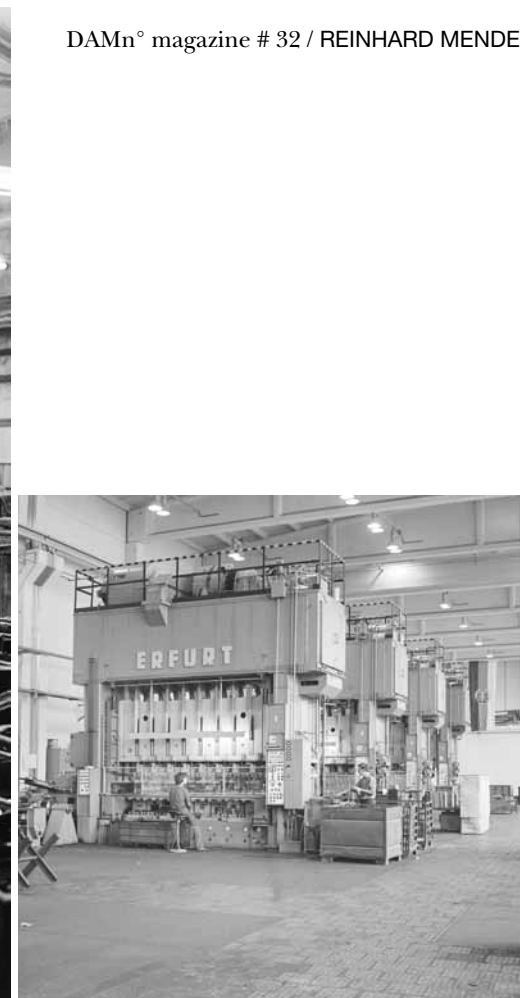
and architecture historian Philip Ursprung. Of course, a number of things still remain opaque at this point: the list of 21 contributors to the exhibition and/or publication, which includes, apart from Mende himself, producers like Herbert Peter Beyer, conceptual artist KP Brehmer, contemporary artist Katrin Mayer and film maker Harun Farocki, along with writers like economic historian Matthias Judd and curators like Thomas Weski, but that only adds to the suspense surrounding the project.

Mende's extensive archives contain his commissions, which he obtained from the late 1960s up until 1990, when the GDR was annexed by the FRG. He worked as a freelance producer for GDR Kombinate (industrial complexes) to promote their products to potential international buyers. This alone maps a territory between socialism and capitalism, which is so intrinsically bound up in antagonisms that the photographs become puzzling, even if their formal characteristics seem fairly conventional, or even repeat classical formal patterns of painterly composition. Within the given frame, this in no way discredits their artistic quality but, quite the contrary, specifies how Mende approached his task because, again, 'originality' is merely a mark of excellence, whereas visual productions claim to be art, cut off from the industrial world

of necessity surrounding them. And Mende's photos were commissioned precisely to bridge this gap. The 'artistic quality' of these images, their vital interest, lies in their ability to outline the ideological gap between the visual reproduction of commodities in state-socialism, on the one hand; and on the other, the photographic representation of these sites and their products as attractive investments for the capitalist West. So how can one even 'read' these series of applied photography today, when their contemporaneity has been systematically neglected by the global capitalism in which we ourselves are constantly participating?

Opposing models

Furthermore, the antagonism and rising destabilisation Mende was facing, which he recorded with his camera, was characterised from the outset by an inherent impossibility. The GDR's economy was adapting a model that had come into being decades before as an enforced historical compromise, when the USSR under Stalin adopted the policy of "socialism in one country", a theory Stalin had already put forth in 1924 and that refuted the necessity of a socialist world revolution in favour of the tentative internal stabilisation of socialism as an economic and political system. Where Lenin and others had argued that





rm_06126_12: 17.03. 1983
Leipzig Spring Fair (top)

rm_00676C_10: 30.08.1982
Minor's lamp 'Zwickau'

communism and capitalism were two opposing models of human reproduction that could not be combined, and that socialism was namely the passage from one to the other, Stalin argued that socialism could be stabilised as an alternative system in allied countries, one of which became the newly founded GDR in 1949. Already in Lenin's New Economic Politics of 1921, elements of capitalist ownership had returned to the socialist terms of production, but with "socialism in one country" this system was no longer instituted as a prospective abolition of all value, but

as an alternative understanding: a state capitalism, as Trotsky critically called it.

When Mende began taking photographs, Stalin had already been dead for 15 years, but the uneasy status of the socialist countries, trying to produce a value-form that could compete against its capitalist other, while theoretically still longing for an altogether systematic abolition of this value, had been dragged all the way into late Fordism. Mende registered the landscape of intended collective production and (photographically) hoped for its alternative commodification, advertising those segments that were meant for the West only, as they did not fit into the socialisation of use-value forms. Double Bound Economies – Photographs of the International Trade Fair in Leipzig and Industrial Operations in the GDR from 1967 to 1990 sets out to open up an archive that systematically lays out a dying economy through images of its most prestigious industries. It offers a reconstruction of our own understanding of what this value-form actually is in relation to art, but also in relation to another economic system in relentless crisis, capitalism. #

Double Bound Economies - Reading an Archive from the GDR (1967-1990)
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www.halle14.org
www.centrephotogeneve.ch