

"The Negation of Negation" by Dmitry Vilensky is a characteristic example of the video documentaries that he has shot in St Petersburg, Moscow and Berlin. In this case, he focuses on workers on a car assembly line in Nizhnyi Novgorod. The monotonous gallery of images is interrupted by shots of people leaving the building somehow too quickly. The context demonstrates that they are workers in the same factory, now going home from work. However, the scenes are more reminiscent of Hollywood disaster films with people running out of a skyscraper where a time bomb is ticking away: the building contains a machine that will destroy the existing order.

After 9/11, such films have been rare in Hollywood: today, the archetypal threat comes from beyond the skyscraper. The destroyer of the existing order is perceived as something coming from outside, and invariably something cast in an ethnic, religious or racial guise. Vilensky, by contrast, swears by the classic economic theory of Marx, according to which it is the workers themselves that constitute the machine that will explode the system of production. There is a measure of polemical pathos in Vilensky's work, for it is the habit of theoreticians of the New Left, above all Toni Negri and Slavoj Žižek, to demonstrate that work has not disappeared, it has only been hidden, and that the foundation of today's world is not the superficial level (leisure, advertising, media) but production itself, just as in Marx's day. The final scene of Vilensky's video, where one of the workers slowly lifts his gaze from the assembly line and looks at the camera, reflects the awakening consciousness of the proletarian: as per Marx, literally, he turns from a class of itself into a class for itself and begins to understand that he must take on the role of the nemesis of the bourgeoisie. Vilensky, as he himself says, associates the worker with the dissident: the video was shot in a factory in the city where Andrei Sakharov was in exile in the 1980s.

In the writings of Marx, work is a critical and even destructive force: the proletarian is destined to wreck society. This is the model of work that Modernist art has incorporated into its arsenal: an artist identifies himself as a worker (Soviet Constructivists) or a machine (Andy Warhol) not because he is creating something physically palpable but quite the opposite: the artist's product becomes an empty symbol, a manifestation of destruction instead of creation. The proletarian is separated from the means of production and has only his work to sell; he creates added value from nothing. The artist demonstrates his alienation from his own tools (which become increasingly minimalist) and uses worthless materials to create a valuable object whose main message is negation. Modernist art is thus a kind of destructive production, the machine intended to blow up the building, in fact.

With Vilensky, things are a bit different. Although his workers embody a critical attitude, it only becomes apparent when one of them moves away from the assembly line. This worker breaks the order, not through becoming conscious of something but through the fact that at the same moment the assembly line comes to a stop. As Soviet history shows, the most efficient weapon available to the working class is not the proletarian revolution it is laziness and sloppy quality, a full-scale sabotage of production, which is what eventually led to the bankruptcy of Socialism.

What underlies Vilensky's works is not revolutionary negation, which prompted such negative artistic manifestos as the Black Square, but sabotage, and in this his art is very much topical. Negation of negation is emphatically non-speculative: it is very simply edited, presenting a slice of raw reality, as is often the case in contemporary art. At the same time it challenges the Hollywood aesthetic and in fact openly sabotages it. It seems as if the artist too is stepping away from the assembly line to stare at the viewer instead of shooting and editing the film, while the fuse of the bomb is already lit.