

## The Identity Question: Artist or Theorist?

### A Conversation with Michael Bielicky (Media Art) and Matteo Pasquinelli (Art Research and Media Philosophy)

Clemens Jahn: When I started to work for the HfG, the first thing I did was to read some of its founder Heinrich Klotz's writings to find out more about the place. One thing that was very important for the whole concept of the HfG – especially with regard to its proximity to the ZKM | Center for Art and Media – is what Klotz called an “interpenetration of theory and practice”: a seamless exchange between art, theory, and design. However, to this day theory and practice are taught as different subjects, as different courses with different degrees: theory is a *Magister* program, and the practical courses are *Diplom* programs.

Michael Bielicky: From the structural point of view, yes. But from the practical point of view, of course, you have professors in the practical subjects who are dealing with theory on a pretty high level. And conversely, there are also theory professors who are involved in artistic activities here. So I wouldn't distinguish between art and theory so strictly.

CJ: But I think the division is more than just rhetoric, because it also represents an institutional structure, with funding, physical space, professional territory, etc. Of course, at the same time there are all these hybrid interdisciplinary practices and professions that keep emerging from this structure. But maybe there are alternatives to this structure that make more sense than the medium-specific subdivision into theoretical and practical subjects – also with regard to professional identities.

Matteo Pasquinelli: I'd like to start with an etymological anecdote: “theater” and “theory” share the same linguistic root and background. In ancient Greek the word *theorein* was used for both theater and for theory, as both act of vision and contemplation. That's just a boring provocation that means I don't see an opposition between theory and art. It demonstrates how close the role of performer or director, for instance, is to the role of the activist and philosopher. But in general, just to throw something else out there, I see both theorist and artist as people who deal with symbolic forms. This is something that's very well understood in the German tradition. Philosophers like Ernst Cassirer and the whole work of the Warburg circle are an example of the incredible obsession of German culture with *Gestalt*: the *Gestalt* of art as much as the *Gestalt* of thought. You don't have that in other cultures. In this legacy it's very easy to see the resemblance between the role of the artist and the role of the theorist, the art form and the theoretical form. As Michael said, in our teaching we mix both: we do the philosophy of art, we do theory with a lot of examples from literature, science fiction – I

find this opposition very blurry.

MB: If I wanted to be a little bit ironic, I would say that as an educational institution we need the infrastructure to function, to practice theory, to practice art. Maybe we should first ask what the framework for all this is: we're still in a building, which is built as an educational institution, where we get those roles, which I already have a problem with. The need to be identified: "Ah, he's the artist, he's the new-media professor." What a limitation! And it doesn't mean that I'm infinite, or that I have universal knowledge, unfortunately I don't. But still, I believe that our roles, even as artist or theorist, if we use those terms at all, are much more open – although already limited by the definition. And I think we live in a very interesting and exciting time, and of course one problem we have is that we have to focus, or else we get lost in everything. And on the other hand we have to somehow open up the traditional boundaries. And we have to balance between focusing and opening – and maybe sometimes we fail.

Talking about education in the art and theory context, I always wonder how we should shape or not shape the students. It's a reciprocal process; they shape us too, hopefully. But how should we do it? There's a lot of space for experimentation, and this is one of only a few institutions, by the way, where it's possible to do so. Look at the U.S. and Asia, how their schools are structured, with fixed curriculums. Here the curriculum is defined by our personalities. That's wonderful and really unique, because there aren't a lot of institutions like that. On one hand, I want to celebrate what we have here, yet on the other, I want to criticize how limited it is, which is schizophrenic.

CJ: What you're saying about being free within boundaries reminds me of a text Matteo wrote a few years ago called "If there is no longer an outside, masochism is the new *love from afar*." So I'm wondering if the framework, this limiting structure, is necessary to actually be able to live a certain freedom.

MP: This is part of the way art works. You give yourself limits, and you have to express everything within those limits. I have a question for Michael: The subject you also follow in your practice, as you called it, is the development of digital art. Is it possible – this is a question very much influenced by Vilém Flusser – that digital art, and the computer itself – is in fact becoming closer to philosophy as in fact a form of logical intelligence? Since the digital is a medium that grew up with cybernetics, imitating the brain, and with the obsession of the mechanization of the mind. I wonder: Is it possible that digital art itself, at the very beginning, was a way to blur the pure plasticity of the traditional plastic arts into the domain of the abstract, the cognitive, the material of the mind?

MB: That's a very good question. There are several possible answers. To clarify: In your perception, digital art is not close enough to humanistic philosophy?

MP: No, it is! I was wondering if – for instance, in the 1990s, some people would even advance this hypothesis in relation to cinema. But with digital art itself being part of the computer age, of the computer revolution, and the computer having been born as an imitation of the brain, digital art was already something in between the traditional plastic arts and something belonging to theory, to the domain of theory. This is an investigative question, an investigative statement.

MB: Firstly, maybe it's because I'm from Prague, and my experience was influenced by the golem robot spirit. But not only that. You have to know that in the '40s, '50s, '60s, Prague was also one of the very interesting places for pre-digital multimedia. So it was kind of a window to how the future would look like in a digital age using the analog tools. They created multiple screens or interactive cinema – all with analog technology. Maybe they just had an intuition, that would become the future. So this is one level. Because talking about digital art is something that generally starts with the late '80s and the early '90s. And I witnessed it from the beginning. When I give talks, I remind people that “digital art,” if we can talk about digital art at all, is a very blurry term.

Today in a way everything is digital. Sound is recorded digitally, photography is digital, film is digital. Any modern-day medium is digital, so what are we talking about? Human beings experience the world in an analog way. And to get in touch with the digital, you have to have some kind of interface between the digital and the analog, because we are analog, we aren't digital. At least I hope not. Sometimes I'm not sure. I call it the humanization of digital culture – that sounds very ambitious, but basically it means finding an interface, which is lacking in most digital products. How, as a human, can you get closer, how can you connect with digital culture in some kind of playful and organic way?

In the thirty years I've been active in this field, there's always been a moment of alienation, or a kind of distance caused by the digital. The digital aesthetic looks often very polished septic and hard-sharp. I just don't like it. There are also very few works of digital art that don't have very short half-time decay. The best example you can see in the collection of the digital art in the ZKM, where you can see works that only had a meaning during a certain time because they were made with a certain technology. And when the younger generation comes to the ZKM they say: “Oh, why is this here in the museum? I have it as a screensaver on my computer. Why is it art?” But maybe now I've gone too far.

MP: Actually, you raised two very important points. One is that we're talking about artists and theorists, but

both art and theory have a historical context. They respond to each other, to the context. You gave the example of a work of art whose meaning disappears because the situation has changed. And we could say the same of theory. This is also a problem, an exercise in antinarcissism, for philosophy and philosophers – including leading philosophers. They produce this precise *Weltanschauung* and then try to relate the world back to it. This is one of the things to discuss : both the artist and the theorist sometimes should, and must, be challenged by history, by the passing of time.

The other thing you mentioned is the symbolic function of digital form in art and theory. Sometimes this act of abstraction in the digital era causes art and theory to suffer from a form of alienation themselves. That is clearly, I would say, a general phenomenon: in anthropology and the “academic lifestyle,” [*laughs*] we spend too much time in front of our books, our laptops, our ideas; we really deteriorate. And this is another aspect. What I’m trying to say is that both – digital art and, in this case, digital theory – are sometimes slightly alienated, consuming themselves and the human being in the process of making.

MB: And on the other hand, we’re confronted daily with digital culture, and we’re also already victims of it, we all spend a certain amount of time getting information and communicating. So we’re already living, every day, a semidigital life – nobody can deny it. On one hand, it has amazing advantages, because we can access information fast, communicate in a way that would have taken so much time fifty years ago. Going to a library, sending letters – you can now instantly get information and send information. Which is amazing. And at the same time, and this is the paradox, this is very confusing for many people; we’re losing focus on topics.

CJ: Just to be sure I understand why you’re focusing so much on the digitization of the practice of both theorists and artists: Is it that, in a way, digital culture has leveled different practices, has become the common denominator of these fields? Maybe this is why we’re even asking these questions. Today designers, artists, and theorists often work with the same tools, within the same material framework. Intuitively you say that a human being is an analog being. But maybe a different generation experiences certain intuitive things differently from how the previous generation experiences them.

MB: Definitely. And that doesn’t mean better or worse. The new generation is already born with all of it. You don’t question it, it just becomes part of you. I grew up with television and radio and telephone. You grew up with being connected, you don’t question it. And we are – I am – probably the last generation that still does. I remember this moment – I was in Prague already as a professor: in 1994 the internet appeared, and I thought, “Wow, what a medium.” Like “BC” and “AD,” I knew that one day we would say “before the Internet” and “after the Internet.” I was aware of this historical moment, and I was so excited about it. And I still believe that

this is a break in human evolution, that from the moment we externalized part of our knowledge to the net, we would become different human beings.

CJ: This is another interesting aspect, and also one of the reasons why we're sitting here: it's not true that you don't question something just because you grew up with it or regard it as normal. Maybe there are things from the pre-internet age that could be quite interesting for us! Now that the mainstream internet as we know it has been around for about twenty years, of course we're asking questions. When the internet came about, you experienced dissolution. Maybe we also want to dissolve certain things today, look at the structures that grew out of these two decades and ask how we actually want them to be.

MP: Can I say something tragic? The '90s were a incredible moment of enthusiasm; we were all utopians when the internet appeared. Network culture, media art, was happening in between Berlin, Amsterdam, and the ZKM in Karlsruhe, along this triangle. And I'm still traveling in the same triangle, by the way. I remember the utopian feelings we had, that we could do something incredibly good with the internet. And today, specifically in the last three or four years, we've witnessed this incredible vertical integration of the network form and the establishment of the monopolies of data centers. And also the transformation of the network form into the form of machine intelligence. Which means that a great concentration of information is being transformed into highly vertically integrated intelligence about the society as a whole. The extended brain that started to develop in the late '90s is now being somehow frozen in datacenters that are controlled by few monopolies. Still, we live in this incredible revolution. But I feel the tragedy of the moment.

MB: I absolutely agree with Matteo. It's very depressing.

MP: Everything is changing, and we don't know how to develop the critical tools to deal with it.

MB: But how could you? It's such a permanent and rapid real-time change. Think about other times when things changed and you had to react to it: you wrote books, novels, there were discussions for several years. But now in just a few months, so many things look different. How can you develop a critical theory about anything? You're always in some kind of delay mode.

CJ: Do you think one should be careful about reinventing certain established structures because the tragic history of the internet shows how quickly dissolution can create a field of corporate monopoly and reactionary intervention? But on the other hand: Doesn't one then just become a conservative?

MP: The question you just asked precisely captures the relationship of this incredible acceleration of technology, economy, globalization, of all values and structures. I feel this question is spreading throughout the political situation worldwide, especially in the U.S. with the current elections. You have this crazy phenomenon of Donald Trump, who's another Berlusconi character. But the feeling I have is precisely connected to this incredible proliferation of, desensitization and alienation – in the bad and the good way – produced by the digital. When you look at the alt-right – the “alternative right” movement – they're the most extreme in experimenting with radical aesthetics, memes, on the internet. You can understand Donald Trump in a way if you understand what's happened to the U.S. economically, socially, and politically, but you also have to understand, what's happened to internet aesthetics in specific circles of American society. And that's something we didn't expect, because we always thought of the internet and the digital aesthetic as inherently liberal and progressive. And then, strangely, these people are now colonizing social media, they have millions of Twitter bots and click farms that are used to produce memes. I sense something weird going on here, an interesting stage of digital evolution.

MB: That's an interesting point, because we're seeing how these forces are using the new technological situation for their own purposes. It's phenomenal to watch these new right-wing people participating in the digital revolution from the other side.

MP: But these are very young people, they're twentysomething, digital natives. They're the only ones who are experimenting with this radical aesthetic. We're not doing this. I'm talking about myself: we do theory, but we didn't do anything really disruptive in that field. So I would probably assign responsibility to the media-theory field, for our failure to foresee this.

CJ: The 1990s internet experience presented a brief moment of materialized postmodern thinking, of multiple identities, gender-bending, anonymity, etc. Now we have normative social media, unprecedented communications monopolies, and constant surveillance. In the academic context: Is a diverse range of fields of study something that needs to be structurally ensured? Is difference something we need to protect?

MB: Yes, ~~something should~~ definitely be mandated, because otherwise there's a danger – you see the tendency in the U.S. and Asia, in the universities, where even the humanities are dissolving. The critical liberal arts no longer exist in Japan. The university is becoming more and more corporate. You ask if there should be some kind of control mechanism that guarantees diversity. This is a good question, and it's very delicate. Because at

the end of the day it depends on who's in power. If the AfD were in power, dictating what diversity should look like, I wouldn't want to study at such a university. ~~But if the dynamic promoted a good spirit or good people, then it would be useful.~~

There's a growing pressure to be more efficient, to better serve the market. In the U.S. and Asia it's like that already, and the universities have changed radically in the last thirty years. Now it's coming to Europe and Germany, which is still relatively free of it, and that would be worth fighting for. This is a very relevant question because if you leave it the way it is, it could get wrecked, and on the other hand, if you give control to the wrong groupings, that's just as dangerous.

MP: I guess today what we need is a kind of art intervention in that field. So instead of a distinction between "artist" and "theorist," the only way we have today – the most immediate, most effective way to respond, to react, including politically – is to intervene at this media-aesthetic level, to produce new narratives and new aesthetics. We've done enough analyses. The responsibility of the arts is to react aesthetically with strong political statements. Not postmodern, not post-postmodern. We need a strong signal and message. We know everything about the digital economy, about the financial crisis. We've done enough theorizing about that.

MB: About two years ago Peter Weibel did a show about activism. And he invited political activists from Ukraine, from Africa, from the Arab Spring, etc. He showed all kinds of activism and then declared the activists to be the artists of our time. They didn't see themselves as artists. But Peter Weibel said: "You are the relevant artists of today." And he was very serious about that.

MP: I would say this means that there is no art and no theory without politics.

MB: Our role in the institution is to cultivate some kind of freedom and a culture of looking around yourself critically. In the end it doesn't matter if you're acting as an artist or as a theorist, it's really that blurry. I see my role as more than just saying "Let's do art," "Let's do an exhibition." I see it as a limitation.

MP: I want to answer the initial question: of course both artists and theorists have a political responsibility today, but what we need is a more effective aesthetic strategy. That means that artists have to work more. Big responsibility: more work to do, guys! *[laughs]*