

Godard or Hitchcock? Theory's Expectations of Art, and Vice Versa

A conversation between Jörg Heiser and Daniel Kurjaković

—

http://www.quadrilogy.org/en/theory_individual?page=1

Godard or Hitchcock? Theory's Expectations of Art, and Vice Versa
A Conversation between Jörg Heiser and Daniel Kurjaković

Artists take part in the production of knowledge in a certain way: today there is a consensus about that among critics, curators, and theorists. Yet what is special about these artistic contributions in relation to the theorems of philosophers is something that is difficult to formulate. It is clear, however, that with the arrival of »language« in art the role of the artist has approached the world of theory. Jörg Heiser emphasizes that this new proximity has changed theory's approach to art, and dares a critique of modernist value systems that lie at the basis of these theorems.

Daniel Kurjaković: What is your view of the assumption that there is an opposition between discourse and artwork? Does this opposition exist for you at all?

Jörg Heiser: The now standard reaction would probably be to say that this opposition should be questioned, because we have all gotten used to artists moving in a discursive space. But that's a bit too simple for me. Theorists like to work—whether they admit it or not—with an image of the *idiot savant*, whereby the artist is a kind of specialist for a certain kind of perception and its creative execution. Philosophers, in turn, are those that pick this up, exemplify it and hermeneutically explore it. As I see it, this problematic continues to exist still today, even if it goes unadmitted. To take an example that illustrates the problem: if you asked Slavoj Žižek why he steers away from Godard, he would reply: »He's pretentious.« But what does pretentious mean? It means that Godard transports certain theorems, be they self-developed or the postulates of others, into his works. Think here of scenes in *One Plus One*, where suddenly a passage from *Mein Kampf* is read, and then, cut, and we see Black Panther activists in the porn shop, those are the breaks that Žižek would call pretentious. In a way, that's part of the craft of philosophy, particularly his own. He himself

constantly works with such breaks: he tells a joke, then something comes from Lacan, and then he goes back to Hegel, and so on.

Conversely, he uses Alfred Hitchcock or David Lynch, where one can assume that their own production—their comments in texts and interviews—doesn't get in his way. Because they cloak their theoretical lining, to the extent that it is at all existent, or in a construction that pretends to be closed. It is no longer standard in art to take such a position, to step back, cryptically allowing the beholder to come to his or her own convictions. In this sense, the borders are blurred, but all the same there are polarities. It clearly seems to me that it's too easy to say that there are just different kinds of knowledge production: it's often said that artists produce a different kind of knowledge than theorists, but in my view that explains nothing, because it's not just about knowledge production, but methods. And the methods are in part extremely different.

DK: The emphasis on experimental methods of experience and knowledge is quite common; this is something that's often emphasized. But the necessary discussion of aesthetic practice and its relation to the concept of truth is much more difficult. Most people shy away from the truth concept.

JH: The concept of truth is an old philosophical problem that for reasons of principle can never be solved in a satisfactory manner. All the same, artists and beholders both operate with certain claims to truth or at least the notion of truth effects or truth production, be it the truth that consists in there being a correlation between concept and execution, for example, or in a certain kind of verifiable plausibility. Of course, the point might precisely be that this verifiability is duped, but then operating with a basic motif of a truth. Works that move towards the documentary necessarily operate with the question of truth, because a reference to the world is formulated that necessarily has to be fulfilled.

DK: Why not simply avoid the question by turning quickly to relativism? What implications might it have for the discussion if we don't insist on this question and the truth concept?

JH: It already starts with the fact that every artwork can be seen as a kind of positioning in relation to what already exists in terms of cultural production,

be it historical or contemporary. I must place the contribution in relationship to what's around it in order to judge it according to its own or my own demands. As a beholder, I look at to what extent the claims that a work itself formulates are fulfilled or not. That is one level. Another level would have to do with the term innovation. Innovation would be another word for the production of a truth: one advances toward something in the production of an artistic work, opening a new perspective on the world or upon art. By opening a perspective, it has truth content.

What lies behind this is the old familiar question of art's criteria. According to which criteria do I create art, according to what criteria do I judge it or perceive it? It's impossible to do entirely without concept of truth, even if it is posed with all possible forms of reservation. Philosophically speaking, it's possible to move in the spectrum between Foucault and Habermas: in the first case, there is a basic assumption that truths are always already subject to power relations. Who speaks to whom, with what authority and establishes which truths? In the second case, we encounter the Habermasian ideal of truth that is based on the production of a discourse, ideally an emancipated discourse with participants on equal footing.

Both are totalizing concepts. There is no way to mediate between these two poles, you cannot place yourself in the middle and say, there can't be a little power here, a little discursive freedom there. But what I certainly can do is to view the same artwork from the two polarizing concepts of truth. On the one hand, I imagine with Habermas that there is a domination-free space in which I can discuss this artwork. The other perspective would be that I ask what it means to read the truth that this artwork produces as an expression of a power relation. Once I have done both operations, I can perhaps arrive at reasonable statements about what the truth content or the truth effects of the relevant work are.

DK: Perhaps we could go into more detail about this. At the beginning, you implied that there is a competition taking place between philosophers and artists that perhaps has to do with speaking itself. Who speaks with what competence, and how this competence is relevant for society or relevant for those that listen?

JH: Both art and theory production are about competence as soon as something like a claim to completeness is introduced. Ultimately, at issue is a problem of modernism, that is, that we often operate with a modernist model of clarity. If one considers Alain Badiou and his aesthetics, he operates with a classical, modernist claim: for him there are a dozen white men who produced valid art in the twentieth century. More or less everything else is declared irrelevant. I would propose someone like François Lyotard as a counter model, someone who takes the trouble "sometimes without success" to create clarities in a different way by taking a few central figures like Marcel Duchamp and Daniel Buren and studying in them the logic according to which they escaped a modernist way of thinking. That's why it's notable that someone like Duchamp plays no role at all for Badiou. It becomes clear that theorists in the narrow sense and above all philosophers at some point agreed on the convention that certain questions of aesthetics are discussed, for example, via Stéphane Mallarmé or Samuel Beckett. Contemporary productions are left by the wayside. Interesting points of contact often emerge when art historians or art theorists produce theorems that are relevant for aesthetics.

DK: Whom do you have in mind?

JH: For example Thierry de Duve or Rosalind Krauss, although they never worked with the goal of providing a complete, philosophical systematics.

DK: Perhaps we could explore the artistic side some more.

JH: I would say that the artists who themselves have a form of textual production are perhaps best in a position to formulate the theoretical achievements of art production and make them discussable. This might not necessarily be a practice of writing: it could also be an interview. It could also take place by working closely together with certain theorists. In conceptual art at any event we have a series of people who themselves have worked philosophically, from Joseph Kosuth to people like Adrian Piper, who is a philosophy professor and a veritable Kantian. Here, certain forms of knowledge production emerge that would not exist if these people were not equally anchored in artistic practice and philosophy. I think that such transdisciplinary procedures offer the greatest possibility that a kind of knowledge production can take place that is not exhausted in the production of new art works or in "standard" academic textual

production.

DK: The 1960s are an interesting time in terms of turning to the discourse of truth. For example, a new type of artist emerged who introduced methodologies of logic, the logic of language, or imitated them, perhaps to set themselves apart from the so-called culture industry.

JH: And at the same time, a role emerged of the artist as intellectual that had not existed previously in that form. That is, artists who appeared with an academic gesture, even presenting their art with the attitude of »hard science«.

DK: It's exciting to realize that the medium of language was by far not an art medium that was widely accepted at the time. The moment of total alienation of the beholder in the face of the first works of Art and Language and many other artists probably has something to do with this.

JH: I would add that it's important to point out that looking at the Art and Language work as theory precisely misses its nature as artwork. What's always at issue here is the same, in part uncanny difference between what is the literal content, as it were, and what actually takes place as art production. This can sometimes be understood in concepts of irony, it can also be understood in concepts of spatial difference. The text can be read in a book. But all the same at issue are works that are shown under certain conditions. And these conditions—how something is placed in the space, where and how it is shown—are not all automatically present in the text.

This interview was originally conducted during the temporary exhibition *Conflicting Tales* in Berlin on October 7, 2009.

Translation by Brian Currid, Berlin.

Burger Collection
Research project 'Quadrilogy' Theory/Conversations

In its on-going series »Theory / Conversations« the Burger Collection engages in conversations with artists, theoreticians, art historians and critics about changing topics related to the exhibition and research project 'Quadrilogy'. The 'Quadrilogy' was started in 2009 and will evolve in the up-coming years under the curatorial leadership of Daniel Kurjakovic. A first series of conversations with art historians and theorists such as Manuela Ammer, Berni Doessegger, Michael Gnehm, Catrin Misselhorn, Stefan Neuner, Beate Söntgen, Frédéric Wecker, and Giovanna Zapperi was published in the first exhibition catalog titled *Conflicting Tales* (2009). More information about the first exhibition, the catalog and further aspects of the 'Quadrilogy' can be found on the homepage www.quadrilogy.org.