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# On the Vanishing Point of Intellectual Activity

A Conversation between Manuel Cirauqui and Daniel Kurjaković
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Research project 'Quadrilogy' Theory/Conversations

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*In the ongoing series of conversations with artists, curators and critics, this time Daniel Kurjaković goes back to Manuel Cirauqui (who contributed one of the main essays to the first exhibition catalogue, Conflicting Tales, of the Burger Collection) to talk about the return of "theory" within a recent wave of contemporary art. Although considering "theory" indispensable, Cirauqui harshly criticizes this specific return for its derivative and fetishistic stance. Instead, he favors a more inclusive approach to intellectual activity by embracing a neo-Stoic concern for a good life that goes beyond the merely simulative citation in neo-theoretical art, itself deeply and problematically linked to a neo-liberal symbolical capitalism.*

Daniel Kurjaković: In critical thinking, there is a very general and surely much too harsh of a contrast constructed between on the one hand the term "discourse", and on the other hand the "work", understood as empirically given. How should this opposition be reformulated to be productive?

Manuel Cirauqui: A priori I would not oppose "discourse" and "work", and specifically never in terms of "ideality vs. empiricism". It is true that, in general, there is an apparent contrast, which we could perceive under different angles: between a category that is somehow related to the oral domain (talking, thinking, chattering, discussing, etc.) and the linked category of the written; between discourse as a form of "spontaneous", "temporal", "immaterial" linguistic production, and the work as its opposite (fixed, measured in its parts and structure, self-conscious, etc.). You could also see this opposition as one between the abstract, theoretical elaboration of thought, and the concrete, "embodied" expression of it through, say, the "figures" of thinking.
These contrasts are purely apparent and extremely ambiguous. The con-

trast between the abstract and the concrete is not less my stifled than the one between the "spontaneous" oral expression and the controlled "self-conscious" written language. The technical situation in which our lives presently evolve makes it possible—if not inevitable or even obligatory—to invert, reorient and combine these articulations of the oral and the written in a lot of manners, namely through all the existing processes of recording, sampling, editing, transcription, and montage. All this informs not only our perception (as a system), but also our actions. So I understand all oppositions between the oral and the written as being largely idealist.

DK: So the opposition is mostly an affair of a long-standing tradition of western philosophy. But to be aware of this hardly weakens its continuing influence.

MC: Well, it is weakening, although it persists as a commonplace. Concerning the apparent contrast between the abstract and the empirical, I can't help remembering the artist Ian Wallace's understanding of art as "philosophy embodied", which I completely share. In this line of thought, there could be another possible reading of how in fact the opposition between "discourse" and "work" mirrors the duality of "theory" and "practice"—an opposition that has become specially problematic in the context of recent art production. In order to avoid any formalistic approach, I think it is necessary to recall the post-modern topos of "the world as text and the text as image" (once again, Ian Wallace's work could be a reference in this), since this is the basis on which the differences between the practice of art and theory—and, thus, between works and discourses—dissolved in the recent years. The institutional identity of an object—theoretical, aesthetic, etc.—is not rooted in the object's structure, but in the function that it is fulfilling within culture. (A culture is, essentially, a system of circulation and exchange, i.e. an economy.) This is how, in the art context, discourse can appear systematically—at least since the 1970's and especially in today's revival of that period—as an artistic icon, in other words as a fetish.
There is a generation of young artists whose work specifically consists in inscribing a so-called theoretical work into the iconic economy of the "spectacular" space of the exhibition; their aim is not to share thought, but to produce theory as reified matter, that is, to produce inert stuff that is taking the form of theory. This gesture will hardly produce anything new in theory since

it relies on a pre-existing frame of recognition where theory is marked as purely linguistic appearance (and is thus "reified"). A form of mimicry operates here that somehow becomes "usurpatory". Fortunately, there is at the same time another generation of people dealing genuinely with new forms of theory: they elaborate theoretical objects by using strategies found in the visual arts—inverting, somehow, the principle of the bourgeois ready-made— but also in science, literature, sociology, publicity. Whichever of the two antinomic sides you may take—the historicist or the experimental—we can observe that the dualism of practice vs. theory is presently being dismantled.

DK: What does the use of these strategies from various fields aim at? You seem to imply that it is about more than just producing a new formal vocabulary.

MC: As much as the art environment produces its own mystifications, it also produces debates. The opposition we are dealing with is itself a mystification, and—just to respond to the bottom line of your first question—the most productive thing we can do is not to reformulate that opposition, but to eliminate it. And this is exactly what is happening now.

DK: But that is tricky since a so-called elimination could easily just reverse roles, by luring theoreticians into role-playing mimicking the role of the "artist", and vice versa, which in turn leaves real differences and the critical work you advocate pretty untouched.

MC: Well, that is also what is happening right now. Eliminating the opposition does not mean necessarily to sweep away or to cover the differences. The most interesting of cultural production always involves the articulation of all oppositions in a non-hierarchic, non-schematic and, ultimately, non-synthetic way. And this is nowadays' irrefutable tendency, I believe.
My ultimate claim is ethical if I may say: it points to the whole arts community and concerns a necessary articulation inclusive of the general system of transmission, education and symbolic production. Why only endlessly produce objects without control, rather than producing knowledge about the objects of art within the perspective of existential improvement? This is why I am interested in the question of what forms of learning and of real intellectual utility appear from each of our symbolic productions, and what is the part of

critical theories into all that.

DK: How can this operation be performed, generalized, so that it does not remain restricted to individual or small-scale experimentation?

MC: I guess the solution to this problem involves an institutional transformation. In other words, if you want to unlock the situation of false antagonism between discourses and works, between art and theory, you have to face a problem of "institutional authority". This concerns those very instances that validate the expressions and gestures of academics, artists, authors, etc. When we face the question of art having a theoretical function, or theoretical discourse having the iconic function of a fetish, we are dealing with an intersection of (at least two) institutional realms. In this particular moment of Western history, those institutional realms seem to somehow fuse. From the fact of their intersection arises therefore the question of what forms of learning and what forms of knowledge one could implement through new forms of texts, of discourse, call it philosophical or whatever, and what forms of learning one could draw from a certain spectacular iconic display.

DK: Let's briefly get back to an earlier point. We had assumed that artistic appropriation or direct referencing of "philosophy" was in most cases not actual philosophical activity. Nevertheless, part of the professional public seems to be drawn to the promise of knowledge that is implied in this strategy. Thus, a certain desire is involved, but maybe also quite a bit of carelessness regarding the confusion operating in this desire. What do you think?

MC: If your question is about the relationship between an iconic regime and a properly philosophical ("un-reified") regime—which for me implies discourse as a manifestation of thought through an objectified language—then I think it is all about the way discourse is socially framed. Social desire is not the kind of term I'd use, since desire itself cannot be perceived out of a social set of opportunities under the control of certain groups (mass entertainment and fashion industries, media (as/and) advertisement companies, etc.) or of social and linguistic authorities that these groups create and support. It all comes back to the question of which institutions and environments are dealing with the social appearances of discourse and artworks, or icons, or reflexive images. This in turn is linked to the problem of how informational and

symbolic exchange is socially organized, and how the forces are distributed. These questions are environmental, "ecologic" insofar as they affect our symbolic ecosystems. I do not think it is only about a specific regime of artistic practice or discourse.

DK: You seem to draw a distinction between "actual philosophical activity" on the one hand and the "use of theory"—as a kind of symbolic capital in the iconic economy—on the other hand…

MC: Once again, it is a distinction but not an opposition. I think any intellectually aware individual evolves inside different circuits of symbolic exchange. The problem with these circuits is that they are institutionally polarized, stuck into protected atmospheres where questioning cannot really produce a real transformation of the symbolic economy. As mentioned before, this transformation happens either way, it creates its own informal institutional framework, which means that the already existing institutions will have to adapt to it, sooner or later.

DK: The notion of "real" intellectual utility you mentioned before seems fundamental. Can you elaborate?

MC: All forms of discussion, including and especially, the theoretical ones, are oriented towards a transformation—or if you want to use a milder term, a rewriting—of the rules of the community's language games. That is the key point. So, what kinds of transformation are being activated and implemented right now through the discursive exchange in the various spaces of cultural production? What is actually our capacity to act after and through philosophy?
This might eventually refer back to an early-Marxist discussion, but I want to share something with regards to one of your own project's dimensions, namely the use of curatorial practice in order to find solutions to the structurally unsatisfying promise of aesthetic discursivity. In preparing this conversation I re-read a project I curated last year where I involved a certain group of people consisting of artists, curators and contemporary poets. It was called "La Forme Théorie", which in English would mean something like "The Theory Form". During the course of the project I tested the hypothesis of whether we can use the exhibition space as a theoretical platform. Can it be an alternative to

the book or to the classroom, in terms of not producing a linear form of knowledge nor an individualistic form of transmission? Rather, how can we exist in a philosophical environment, and which forms of dialogue can proliferate from this? The question of how the curatorial realm can take these issues into account implies, as I said, a deep institutional transformation. The key attempt of this project was to use the traditionally contemplative museum context as a surface for epistemological experimentation. It ultimately failed in its attempts, since we could not help to deliver, despite all, a form of still, authoritarian discourse—a form of frozen thought. The audience did maybe witness a set of transformations in the production of contemporary art theory, but it was not directly transformed itself by them. To a certain extent it therefore was a success to make the project, but only a success in theory.

DK: By "still" thought you mean "reified" thought?

MC: Maybe it was reified insofar as it was essentially iconic, and frozen insofar as it is somewhat stable, whereas social debate and thought are essentially unstable matter, and we did not succeed to articulate both. I think these forms can still be intellectually useful but, once again, as long as individuals do not organize themselves to transform the protocols of collective reading, and to transform the way we are actually dealing with knowledge, this knowledge will continue to be handled in an individualistic, isolationist way. It will increase our knowledge of the deadly inertia we live in, but it won't allow us to get out of it. A paraphrase of Emma Goldman's famous words—"if voting changed everything then they'd make it illegal"—seems pertinent at this point.

DK: By mentioning the need of "institutional transformation" do you mean we should found new kinds of institutions?

MC: Absolutely. The creation of new or anti-institutions—what Marcelo Expósito and the transform research group have called "monster institutions" and in general of new forms of community, that is the vanishing point and at the same time the blind spot of every interesting curatorial and collective project in the arts.

DK: Let's look a bit closer at how the relationship between philosophical

activity and theory could be described. In what sense do you consider the two as being co-extensive? Or is there an important difference between the two realms?

MC: This is a very tricky question. Because what do you call theory? Do you call theory a certain type of discourse, or do you call theory a certain use of discourse? Would you define philosophy by its object, and theory by its form? I do not think philosophy and theory are opposed or synonymous, or coextensive. Here I should venture a definition of philosophy. And of course my reflex will be to grab my dictionary: "Investigation of the nature, causes, or principles of reality, knowledge, or values, based on logical reasoning rather than empirical methods… Love and pursuit of wisdom by intellectual means and moral self-discipline… The critical analysis of fundamental assumptions or beliefs… The discipline comprising logic, ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics, and epistemology…" And then I'd have a look at "theory": "Abstract reasoning; speculation… A set of statements or principles devised to explain a group of facts or phenomena, especially one that has been repeatedly tested or is widely accepted and can be used to make predictions about natural phenomena… The branch of a science or art consisting of its explanatory statements, accepted principles, and methods of analysis, as opposed to practice…" As one can see, there are some crossovers between philosophy and theory, not an identity.

A feature specific to "theory" is its relation to a certain practice or to practices: to art theory, for instance, but also economic theory, or political theory. Unlike philosophy—which underlies many activities including art, poetry, etc.—, theory seems to be the reflexive moment of a certain specific exercise. Now, art—and I'm including poetry into this broad category—is maybe the sole realm where the production of theory can be included in its practice (let"s recall the work of the Art & Language group, just to name a historical instance) and, vice-versa, where the artwork can be considered as being intrinsically theoretical (and here I'd recall Roland Barthes' statement about the absorption or annexation of criticism into/by modern poetry and art).

DK: Let's go back to the term "philosophical activity" you mentioned. It sounded Brechtian in its way to underline "practice" or in terms of trying to actively alter the spectator. So far, so good. Now, aestheticized "theory" in the practice of for example recent neo-academic conceptualism seems to have

quite a different "sociology"…

MC: I totally agree with you calling it neo-academic conceptualism, although "conceptual historicism" or something like that could do as well. Indeed, we could say that despite its 1970's "retro" attitude, so-called neo-conceptualism is plainly formalistic or even reactionary. The neo-conceptual label has been seemingly created by a more or less globalized group of mediocre art historians (most of them, working for art institutions) who were interested in promoting a submissive relation to the Text, a "return" to the institution or the Academy as a way of providing the market with a "safe" poetic. There is definitely a new manner of fooling around with references and paradigms which is a sign of our times, something common to all of us; however, the will to put a label to a group of homogeneous historicist practices seems stupid to me—not to speak about the laughable pretension to create a "movement" out of it. What this group of mediocre historians and artists defends, is an artistic pathos based on authoritarian reference, and a bottomless ironic attitude that betrays the most conformist, passive-aggressive form of political consciousness. In formal terms, it is a total pastiche not because of its dependence on a corrupted source, but because of its ridiculous concern to follow the canon of "historical conceptualism" (a term that should itself be seriously questioned). And that's all about that new contemporary formalist wave. Try to peel it, there is nothing inside. Neo-conceptualism is just a fake banana.

On a different note, last night I was reading Seneca's Moral Epistles. Seneca is a philosopher you would rarely call upon for a critique of conceptual art. In his epistle XXXIII, he wrote: "For this reason I hold that there is nothing of eminence in all such men as these, who never create anything themselves, but always lurk in the shadow of others, playing the role of interpreters, never daring to put once into practice what they have been so long in learning. They have exercised their memories on other men's material. But it is one thing to remember, another to know".

DK: Great.

MC: "Remembering is merely safeguarding something entrusted to the memory; knowing, however, means making everything your own; it means not depending upon the copy and not all the time glancing back at the master."

What gets confused today is this difference between "recalling" and actually "knowing". As a way out of it we can for example map knowledge through an economy of quotations. Working with quotations—which is opposed to just working through mere repetition and mimicry—is key to understand how thoughts interact as Walter Benjamin and Brecht showed so well. At the same time the quotational work must imply a syntactic reflection—as intuitive as it may be—which is the keystone of the art of montage; it allows us to understand the mechanisms of the continuous processes of learning and knowing that haunt our culture. The key is, once again, not to isolate theory and practice—and this goes back to the shift from the "practice of theory" to "practical theory" of both Marx and the Situationists.

DK: Seneca mentions that people live in the shadow of the merits of other people. It would be interesting to question the relationship of the art world to this "shadow-sphere". We might understand more about social mechanisms in general if we would understand the possible reasons of why this desire to live in the "shadow-sphere" just underneath authority is so powerful.

MC: This is actually a major ethical problem that spans from the Greeks to us. But it was with the Aufklärung that it became a main intellectual issue. Kant synthesized it by saying that we need to access "adulthood" through means of self-critique and of giving ourselves rules according to a critical instance, which in his case was reason. Personally, I would not defend reason as the sole critical instance, I would be more Nietzschean with regards to this particular point, but at the same time I totally follow Kant's claim that any individual must access that state of adulthood, where the authoritarian influence—what you call the shadow-sphere—is excluded from our intellectual life.

The opposite of that shadow-sphere is the sphere of autonomy, a term tragically misunderstood when used in the domain of the visual arts. Most people immediately associate it with Clement Greenberg who was more of a propagandist than a critic. Actually, what happened to this concept amounts to a sort of allegory of the functioning of influence (or the "shadow") in art. Art's autonomy is not its self-referentiality, but the artist's capacity as a producer to separate from all (social) tasks in order to address, signify or re-produce them critically. In other terms, the producer will go back to them and keep contact with them through the interface called art. Now, please note that my definition here is completely non-specific and non-formal; it doesn't imply

any particular kind of action or object to be considered as artwork. This is, on the other hand, a way of updating Adorno's concept of artistic autonomy without subscribing to his modernist claims. When Adorno speaks of autonomy, he is pointing toward a subjective instance that he calls the "unreconciled conciousness"; and I think we could speak of unreconciled consciousness in Seneca's case, too. That's why he is encouraging his disciple to leave all his mundane activities, if he wants to become a philosopher.

DK: Does Seneca elaborate on how this autonomy can be realized?

MC: Seneca wrote the Moral Epistles in order to teach the specifically Stoic way of life to his disciple. Thus, the epistles actually review almost all aspects of life, from the relationship to one's family to the role of the philosopher on the political scene. When reading the Stoic doctrine I think that, above all, one should remember that philosophy was a tool to set oneself free from the constraints of life and to get a peace of mind. This use of philosophy, as a tool for critical self-transformation, remains extremely important to me; it has a deep revolutionary component because transforming your life, your position and your behavior in the world has a direct impact on it.

DK: It is a two-sided job, it seems to me, one side of the job actually consisting in articulating, in positive terms, what the individual ethical perspective could look like, the other side demanding for an analysis of the socio-political and psycho-social dynamics favorable to the dependency from authority. Not a minor job.

MC: Right. Why is it so difficult to abolish the authority's influence? It's difficult because unfortunately the intellectually aware people are obviously also prisoners of a vicious system of scarcity and dependence.

DK: You seemed to jump from scarcity to utopia in your argument...

MC: Scarcity and the possibility of imagining utopia are deeply connected. The system of scarcity, where systematically underpaid art workers are constantly threatened of economic exclusion implies that a good dose of realism is injected constantly in our systems. I think this vicious structural situation, inducing the bitterest forms of cynicism, is largely shared on all levels of the

arts. "Wanna make your way through? Be realistic… Accept the rules of the game. You won't accept them? Sorry, you won't have any coins to play either". In this sense, my claim for self-organization might sound utopian, but it's not a trivial daydream. It seems urgent to me to reformulate the parameters of utopian thinking outside of the welfare state framework, in other words: assuming the dissolution of the middle class as a basis. This is extremely important since today we only see nostalgic celebrations of past revolutionary projects, retrospective analyses, but very rare proposals for the present. If intellectually aware people would organize themselves—creating, say, self-sufficient networks—in such ways that their essential needs would be covered, I think they would then be more autonomous and then stronger, capable to deal with their real interests and pleasures without exposing themselves to, say, charity or prostitution.

DK: What kinds of needs are you precisely talking about? It sounds a bit too much like nostalgia for the 70s.

MC: My political references are in libertarian thought, from the 19th century to cyberpunk, not to forget Spanish anarchism in the 1920's–30's or the Black Panthers. I hate the "rock and roll" vision of politics, romantic terrorists and, of course, hippies. I don't want to draw any specific political agenda myself right here. The definition of needs is something specific to each micro-community, and a micro-community is created by specific needs that are shared and confronted collectively. There might be a micro-community of perverts, strictly oriented to manage perverted needs… What I'm saying is sure very schematic and general, but being more precise would imply to draw a political "cahier de charges", and this is not the right place to do that.

DK: Nevertheless, I am quite skeptical that Kantian adulthood can be achieved on a societal level. And in terms of a general program of social advancement or betterment I am very doubtful of its usefulness and even its legitimacy…

MC: Once again, my aim now is not to draw a political agenda, but to hint at the vanishing point of what I consider a sincere intellectual dedication and its necessary conditions of existence.

DK: But some of the present forces within Western society—rooted in the lack of a deep understanding of culture on the one hand, and caused by the economic determinism on the other—are extremely difficult to reconcile with or simply stand in the way of such an utopian scheme.

MC: These forces have always been there. It is not a question of drawing a utopian scheme. But, to phrase it in slightly Deleuzian terms, I think so-called utopia is constantly being accomplished on a molecular scale; we just need to expand that percentage as much as possible. Far from mere interest in or the research of the "common good", it is a question of pleasure.

DK: How can this be done?

MC: What? The multiplication of micro-revolutions? There are INFINITE ways… But this kind of thing should not be exposed to the public domain just like this. Once again, one thing is to declare a position and another thing is to draw a program or, even worse, a manual; this is not the place to do it. Besides, I think contemporary revolutions will be, in a big percentage, confidential—or won't be. If you want examples of micro-revolutions, I think art history is full of them (think of the meetings and parties of the early Surrealists, think of Le Grand Jeu, or Cornelius Cardew's Scratch orchestra, some of the Fluxus performances or Otto Muehl's commune, but also many more after them on smaller and more ephemeral levels; think of Sun Ra's Arkestra  You can also pick many examples from testimonial literature such as, say, Roberto Bolaño's novel Los detectives salvajes.

When it is accomplished generously and autonomously, intellectual coope-ration expands over the entire existential sphere and becomes a vector of happiness. It is not by chance that certain philosophically or artistically dri-ven communities have long occupied the marginal history of culture, in other words, that certain philosophical or aesthetic systems could only develop in the framework of small groups, brotherhoods, sects, etc. It is related to a form of anarchy—and I don't mean it in the post-industrial punk sense—or to what I should rather call "acracy": a succession of autotelic, discreet moves within the regular order of life. These are not aimed at "destroying" it, but at suspending it occasionally, partially and strategically. Within this ephemeral perspective, it does not seem so difficult to imagine those spaces of life and production that others would call "utopian" (although they are perfectly plau-

sible). I assume these spaces have to be parasitical, mobile, temporary and of course invisible (confidential). I guess you could also call this "the politics of friendship".

This interview was conducted in Berlin, September 2009.

Burger Collection
Research project 'Quadrilogy' Theory/Conversations

In its on-going series "Theory/Conversations" the Burger Collection en-gages in conver-sations with artists, theoreticians, art historians and critics about changing topics related to the exhibition and research project '*Quad-rilogy*'. 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 Sönt-gen, Frédéric Wecker, and Giovanna Zapperi was published in the first exhi-bition catalog titled *Conflicting Tale*s (2009). More information about the first exhibition, the catalog and further aspects of the '*Quadrilogy*' can be found on the homepage www.quadrilogy.org.