

## **Ingo Vetter**

### **Transform / Translate**

A report on Asian production sites used to manufacture international art.

They appear as if from nowhere – monumental artworks at biennales and in urban/public space, larger and more elaborately produced than twenty years before. That, or copies of famous works in all desired formats and grades of quality<sup>1</sup>; or art students' pieces, delivered by courier in the morning and hung at the degree show by midday.

Today, the production of artistic work, (or rather its realization), is not necessarily a mandatory stage in the artistic development process, but rather a result of this. This has its theoretical foundations in developments originating from artistic discourse, at least since the 1960s – practically seen, artists are following the general developmental path that our own contact with commodities and products has taken. All the same, art education certainly faces a challenge in times where students are ordering their artwork from Alibaba<sup>2</sup> rather than creating it in their own studio spaces. How might we continue to discuss artistic decisions or contextualize the artwork itself? Which criteria can we introduce? How does this manner of working change our personal conceptions of what it is to be artistic producers?

As part of the course 'Artistic Material and Production during Globalization' at Bremen's University of the Arts, we dealt with the question as to how artworks and, in particular, monumental sculptures are now produced for today's exhibition machinery, one made up of biennales and large-scale exhibitions. Research began with students examining their own practice within the university's studios and workshops, and then led them to investigate the mega-studios of Joep van Lieshout in Rotterdam or Olafur Eliasson in Berlin, as well as specialized firms who are hired to complete the entire production process from the initial sketch right up to installing the exhibition.<sup>3</sup> We had to deduce what many of the terms actually meant: During the research, 'studio', 'creativity', 'authorship' and 'artistic production' took on increasingly complex meanings, yet still helped us keep an eye on the context.

Following a preparatory period of three semesters, the course students traveled to Thailand, Vietnam, Hong Kong and South China in October 2013. Here we were particularly interested in seeing the locations where international artists commission production of their work for international exhibitions. We documented the workshops, and spoke to the directors, employees as well as any artists present, inquiring about methods of communication, decision-making processes and translation issues.

In order to better assess the situation in each of the countries, we visited art schools, galleries, independent spaces and museums, and spoke to those responsible at each of the institutions. We were curious about the relationship that existed between the productions and their clients, (such as biennales and international major exhibitions, galleries and the art market), or relations between international art producers flying in for the event and the local scene. We also inquired about the education offered at each location and spoke to the native artists who are also active at international level.

The travel report was published in the form of a blog<sup>4</sup> and the results of the exchange were published as a catalogue<sup>5</sup>. The topic was important to us not only as artistic producers but also as students and teachers at an art school. We attempted to keep the questions relevant to our own practice, and our encounters proved to be just as direct, propelled by an interest in the people and places, opportunities and challenges – many partnerships and friendships were formed as a result, as well as a perspective upon a globalized form of artistic labor.

To return to the question of realization, or do-it-yourself, the curator Pauline J. Yao describes the widely-construed notion that whatever one might intend to make or do, there is always somebody out there who can do it better, and perhaps even cheaper, than one could ever hope to achieve.<sup>6</sup> Ai Weiwei believes that this new division of labor relieves artist from the necessity of master craftsmanship and opens up ways of dealing with new materials and technologies.<sup>7</sup> The artist's role shifts from that of a creator of art to that of a producer, rather like a film producer who divides the realization of a piece into a variety of tasks and work phases.

It is not just a matter of DIY, however. Artists have been working together with assistants, specialists and workshops to produce their pieces for eons. Yet the myth, or rather ideal image, of the artist as sole creator of the work remains tenacious. The studio is perceived as being a secretive location wherefrom 'The New' may originate<sup>8</sup> - to speak of 'production' in this context would be tantamount to profanity: A preferable term would be 'creation'. However, every single piece of art has its moment of realization - when sketches and ideas merge to become a piece of art and the tangible view of the art introduces questions on working conditions, economy and distribution.

An excellent example of this happened in the context of mid-17th century Dutch painting, where the studios became factories, organized according to division of labor and with specialist artists who, for example, would only paint backgrounds, flowers or hands. The more hands were featured in a picture, the more expensive its sale value. Art followed the market economy demand and celebrity artists traveled throughout Europe's noble courts in order to acquire purchase orders for their

production sites. Never before had so many pictures been produced. On home territory, a type of artistic proletariat came into being, one that would paint images *en masse* to meet public demand. The art market developed, which, within a short period of time, had fundamentally changed the production, distribution and reception of art.<sup>9</sup>

Is the question of production excellence decisive when it comes to realization? In the 1990s, Jeff Koons felt it was important to underline the fact that his work was produced by Sèvres' best ceramicists, South Tirol's best woodcarvers or Muranos' best glass blowers. After conceptual considerations, (e.g. having the *Made in Heaven* series' pornographic depictions manufactured in traditional *Herrgottschtzer*<sup>10</sup> (crucifix carver) wood workshops), the respective particulars not only generated value but also gave the work its seal of approval. One might compare this with the presentation of Damien Hirst's diamond skull *For the Love of God* in 2007, for which there were initially no statements made about the manufacture<sup>11</sup>, aside from speculations that the realization of the sculpture had caused fluctuations in the price of diamonds on the global market.

So what happened in the meantime to render the origin of these things or the aspect of their physical production insignificant? The answer might lie in market globalization that, as of the 1980s, has become the dominant economic principle and made all products, materials and production methods accessible. Quality is only a question of the price people are willing to pay. This means that the quality of a particular traditional craftsmanship (to which Jeff Koons was referring to in the 1990s) is, in itself, devalued in that it seems to be replaceable.

In the case of Damien Hirst, production is something that takes place in his three *factories* where he employs around 120 workers - a kind of cached 'black box'<sup>1</sup>, within which art is manufactured. Jeff Koons currently also runs large studios that both bear his name and have a significant number of employees who produce his pieces with great care and precision. However these two in-house production sites seem almost old-fashioned nowadays, almost like the Volkswagen group's glass-fronted factory in Dresden<sup>12</sup> - ultimately a place where value-enhancing craftsmanship is staged, and symbolically justifies<sup>13</sup> the high prices of the products made there (the upper class model *Phaeton* is manufactured in Dresden). At the same time, the parent company's global value rages on.

Internationality is, of course, an important attribute for artistic producers, with the world both as playing field and exhibition location. But its not just international invitations that garner interest – lagging somewhat behind, artists are now following industry's production shift and commission their works to be produced in locations with low-cost labor. This is not, however, the case for all

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<sup>1</sup> *Translator's note*: Referring to the flight recorder in aircraft, used here to describe a type of hidden production unit/process, one that stands in stark contrast to the glamorous public image and 'open' nature of Warhol's factory.

artistic producers and is only really relevant in terms of cost-intensive realizations. When it comes to commissions for art in public space, or when planning works for major exhibitions, no time is wasted in talking money and the math is simple: The cast aluminum ordered in Germany could be made in Poland for the same amount but at double the size; in Thailand it would be four-times as big and in China even bigger. Transport and settlement costs are of barely any significance.

This is when the artists' imaginations about feasibility and those of their clients can start to run wild. Sketches and models are made and price quotes gathered. Size and quantity seem to play a more important role than the absolute costs; specialized companies work reliably and quickly, communication becomes critical, and there is a constant need for translations - translations of the language, art appreciation and content. The Swedish artist Maria Miesenberger notes that public art in Scandinavia has a distinctly Asian aesthetic to it<sup>14</sup>. With the manual enlargement of models, there is indisputably greater room for interpretation, and aesthetics are always a part of cultural context. This is particularly obvious in the display of facial expressions or hand positions, but also in the resulting surfaces and volumes that had to be devised and filled during the sculptures' scaling. In order to avoid complaints from clients, many companies have begun to employ digital model scaling (using 3D scanners and CNC milling). This doesn't resolve misunderstandings but merely shifts them from being on a linguistic or cultural level to a technical one.

Ultimately the selected production company's competence lies in its ability to understand the artists and their intentions. During many of our visits it turned out that it was art-school-trained artists who, at the very least, held the role of artistic director at the company. In the case of large-scale realizations it was expected that the clients pay at least two personal visits to the production site: The first visit to reach an agreement upon the order itself, meaning looking at and discussing sketches, models and execution, and the second for corrections and fine-tuning, once the larger forms have already been produced but prior to finishing - „To get a personal touch of the artist“<sup>15</sup>. In the interim, communication is conducted via emails and photos documenting stages of the process. Personal attendance of the artist during realization is desirable, yet, according to all the companies we visited, is seldom fulfilled. It seems that, having handed in the order, the remaining fascination lies in the realization being carried out by invisible, diligent hands, as if the work would somehow create itself. We were shown a particularly crass example of this by the employees of a stone masonry in Vietnam to whom a client had sent faxes with near illegible sketches for a freeze, featuring dimensions in handwritten form and without any further confirmations or personal visits.

Few artists make a point of discussing the globalized realization of their works, nor the division of labor required – in actuality, the majority would prefer to withhold the details. Production is not a desirable topic of conversation, for a variety of reasons: On the one hand, we have a kind of

universal connection with commodities or products that promise to fulfill our needs and function according to their instructions, to be replaced in good time.<sup>16</sup> We use them, address our relationship to them or the design of the external casing, but don't really want to know what they look like below the surface, nor where they came from. Would anyone really unscrew his or her own iPhone to take a peek inside?

On the other it is the artists themselves who are responsible for keeping production conditions secret. Ai Weiwei's statements about breaking away from the necessity of masterful craftsmanship, as cited above, can be generalized to the level of the post-medial *CTRL+P*<sup>2</sup> approach. As with using a computer for text editing and final document printing, the artistic labor required to create an artwork may only include conceptual development, while actual realization simply presents a subordinate part of the process. This provides, of course, great opportunities but it also means that access to realization is perceived in exactly the same manner as the access to artifacts – as seemingly self-evident.

Many of the companies with whom we were able to speak indicated that their clients prefer to remain anonymous. There is usually a very pragmatic thinking behind this, including, for example, the market value of the pieces: Gallery prices for the artworks might suffer if the place of production is revealed to be a sort of art factory located in China. Marketing presents another problem for the companies, when they are not allowed to advertise the fact that they have helped create prominent artworks on their websites. Aside from this, artists appear to be very conservative clients. The owner of a Thai foundry reported a futile attempt to acquire new clients via international mailouts – there was hardly any response and new clients only came through recommendations from existing artist and gallery contacts.<sup>17</sup>

Contractual relations have also generated thoroughly positive effects – foreign clients usually pay attention to the correct implementation of fundamental work safety and laborers rights. On the other hand, many manufacturers with international clients have introduced training and improvements in living standards, as well as accident insurance, health insurance and pension plans for the workers. This developmental aspect is more than just a decorative feature that hides cheap labor. Furthermore, more intensive exchange between international artists and the local art scene, art institutions and educational facilities or art schools would be desirable.

Practical advantages for the artists include being able to work with particular materials and production methods, without the necessity of doing everything oneself - but most of all the realization is financially viable. Going about describing the resulting shifts in meaning that occur in

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<sup>2</sup> *Translators note:* Referring to the PC keyboard shortcut “print” command.

the art itself are, most certainly, more difficult. With regards to the increasingly large-scale works being created, the question arises as to whether there a new category should be created for artworks that, without access to cheap labor and globalized production, would not be possible in this form at all. Or conversely: With the introduction of more and more biennales and major exhibitions that, as a rule, only feature a limited number of renowned artists, production conditions have drastically changed and thus the demand to outsource realization of the pieces has become greater.

Therefore it is high time for a more offensive observation of the division of labor and globalized manufacture of artworks as being part of the artistic process. Finding an insightful and reflected approach is the task of art education and essentially up to the artists themselves. To conclude, here is a successful example:

Qui Anxiong's piece *We are the World* (2008) deals directly with the global division of labor, in that the artist makes unceremonious use of an artwork that has been commissioned for realization in China by a French artist but was never paid for and remained uncollected. The installation at the *7th Shanghai Biennale* comprised of a space holding identical, life-size sculptures of dogs made from glass fiber reinforced polyester, with the sides of the space flanked by four enlarged versions of the same sculpture. Some of the sculptures are still in their casing or in process; the production process is left in a state of abortion and even the workbenches, common room and sleeping quarters of the workers are included as part of the installation. The dog sculptures were originally conceived for the Cannes film festival and the French artist responsible is currently suing Qui Anxiong for both intellectual property and copyright theft. However, Qiu Anxiong hits back at this clichéd accusation in a wonderful way by descriptively revealing the connections between the glamor of a major event in Europe and the invisible production in China. In his blog he writes: „If artists lose their awareness of existence and their critical effect on the surrounding world, then art will fall to materialism. So-called creation would be nothing but a cheap trick to please the eyes.”<sup>18</sup>

## Illustrations

The illustrations are separate to the accompanying text and can be used individually or as a series, to be selected by those responsible for publication design. I will send a CD containing the files to the editor.



(fig. 1) Gallery Street in the Oil Painting Village, Dafen, China, 2013.



(fig. 2) Danang Sculpture Foundation workshops, Da Nang, Vietnam.



(fig. 3) Danang Sculpture Foundation workshops, Da Nang, Vietnam.



(fig. 4) Street view in Non Nuoc Stone Handicraft village, Non Nuoc, Vietnam: Almost 300 stonemasons work here.



(fig. 5) Modeling workshop at Qigu Sculpture Art, Foshan, China with instructions for corrections issued by the client.



(fig. 6) Sand form construction for bronze casting at Asia Fine Arts, Ayutthaya, Thailand.



(fig. 7) Ceramic-Shell form construction for bronze casting at Asia Fine Arts, Ayutthaya, Thailand.



(fig. 8) Bronze casting at Asia Fine Arts, Ayutthaya, Thailand.



(fig. 9) Finishing work being carried out on bronze sculptures at Thai Metal Crafters, Sai Noi, Thailand.



(fig. 10) An Indian artist discusses the montage of her bronze casts with employees from Asia Fine Arts, Ayutthaya, Thailand.



(fig. 11) Aluminum and stainless steel sculptures being finished and retouched at Qigu Sculpture Art, Foshan, China.



(fig. 12) Modeling workshop at Guangzhou Fangyuan Sculpture Art Manufacture Center, Guangzhou, China.

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<sup>1</sup> Qualitative, sophisticated copies of Jeff Koons' Balloon Dogs from Alibaba cause a stir, see: Eileen Kinsella, Chinese Jeff Koons Knock-Offs Are Increasingly Sophisticated, 29th July 2014, <http://news.artnet.com/market/chinese-jeff-koons-knock-offs-are-increasingly-sophisticated->

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68779?utm\_campaign=artnetnews&utm\_source=073014daily&utm\_medium=email -  
.U9pdlpAqHK8.facebook, Zugriff am 9. February 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Online see <http://www.alibaba.com>, last accessed 9th February 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Aside from other workshops, we visited Sculpture Berlin in January 2013, (<http://www.sculptureberlin.com>) and mixed media berlin (<http://www.mixedmedia-berlin.com>), last accessed 9th February 2015.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://klassevetter.hfk-bremen.de/asiensexkursion-oktober-2013-2>, last accessed 9th February 2015.

<sup>5</sup> The publication *Umsetzen/Übersetzen* (Realise/Translate) will come out in Spring/Summer 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Pauline J. Yao in her essay *In Production Mode. Contemporary Art in China*, Hong Kong, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Ai Weiwei, *Production Notes*, in: *Artforum*, October 2007, p. 324.

<sup>8</sup> See *Topos Atelier: Werkstatt und Wissensform*, edited by Michael Diers and Monika Wagner, (= Hamburger Forschungen zur Kunstgeschichte, Bd. 7), Berlin 2010.

<sup>9</sup> See also: Svetlana Alpers, *Kunst als Beschreibung. Holländische Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Ostfildern 1998.

<sup>10</sup> The colored wooden sculpture *Jeff and Ilona (Made in Heaven)*, 1990, was produced in St. Ulrich, Bolzano, Italy by Demetz Art Studio.

<sup>11</sup> Jewelry designer Jack du Rose was in charge of design and, according to him, had no direct contact with the artist. Renowned London jewelers Bentley & Skinner who are, nevertheless, better known for their expertise in historic jewelry carried out production.

<sup>12</sup> Online; see <https://www.glaesernemanufaktur.de>, last accessed 9th February 2015.

<sup>13</sup> The following article by Olaf Nicolai is also of interest here, «Produktion als Performance oder Die Arbeit im Diorama», in: *Theater der Zeit*, 1999, Heft 9, pp. 22–25.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Maria Miesenberger, published in *Umsetzen/Übersetzen* 2015 (see note 5).

<sup>15</sup> According to foundry owner Karn Vongsingthong during our visit to Thai Metal Crafters in Sai Noi, Thailand, on 17th October 2013.

<sup>16</sup> See also: Reinhard Knodt, *Ästhetische Korrespondenzen*, Stuttgart 1994.

<sup>17</sup> According to foundry owner Karn Vongsingthong during our visit to Thai Metal Crafters in Sai Noi, Thailand, on 17th October 2013.

<sup>18</sup> See the project website: <http://quianxiongsweartheworld.blogspot.com>, last accessed 9th February 2015 and Wenny Teo, «Lost and Found Dogs. Desiring Production in Qiu Anxiong *We Are the World*», in: *Negotiating Difference. Contemporary Chinese Art in the Global Context*, edited by Birgit Hopfener, Franziska Koch, Jeong-hee, Lee-Kalisch and Juliane Noth, Weimar 2009, pp. 273–280.

Illustrations:

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