ZEITGUISED

Henrik Mauler | Interview

Q&A

1. We are very honored to interview and discuss with you: Hello, Henrik Mauler, we are honored to interview you. We know that you established the studio together with Jamie Raap in 2001.You are a pioneer of digital virtual art, as the founder of ZEITGUISED, what kind of opportunity made you decide to establish this studio? Does ZEITGUISED have any special meaning?

Thank you, I am honored!
The start of ZEITGUISED was indeed a lucky strike, a seized opportunity, a special moment in time when several currents coincided: In 2001 I had just graduated from art school in architecture and design earlier that year with “Popular Mechanics”, a project that mused about an AI driven robotic architecture and transport system for downtown Chicago. I presented that concept as an installation encompassing real time VR (Cave), 3D printed models and a 20 min cg animated film. That was made possible by acute advancements in computer aided technology, an area that used to be the realm of high end production outfits. Suddenly, artists with simple means like me were able to become makers of complex spatio-temporal constructions, in what had already become a key future technology spanning production of material objects to moving images/films to entirely generative virtual realities, not even speaking of the unlimited stylistic permutations possible on those playing fields. The coinage ZEITGUISED as an art and design brand was trying to embrace that mentioned moment in time, but also hinting that all future zeitgeist versions, might get a twisted twin sibling from this artist studio. And it includes the key universal components “time” and “textiles” as a semantic bonus track.

2. ZEITGUISED is a digital art practice spanning its own genre defying work space between virtual and physical, abstract and figurative, generative and manufactured, highbrow and low-fi.Is this your design concept and artistic philosophy? Where do you usually get your creative inspiration?

Just looking back at the development of my work over the years now, there seems to be an overarching strand that holds everything together: I decided to call it “virtual vandalism”, as this expresses my approach of formally extending something existing and thus reinterpreting its meaning. It also gives name to my approach of finding things and then tinkering with them until they either break or are put back together in a new way, with an uneasy, uncanny edginess. Something that is desirable and unsettling at the same time, hence the “vandalism“ tendency: something being added to the original that is not asked for or expected, a prosthetic for a limb that never existed in the first place. The granny that gets led across the road but never intended to do that, but claims to be liking it anyways. The philosophy of regarding human activity (techné) as being universally prosthetic for ourselves is a concept I acquired from my teachers, personally and via literature, but it’s a quite fitting metaphor to my artwork as it has strong technical aspects on the one hand, and complementing my personal, inner discontinuities on the other. I basically suffer from compensating those inner fault lines by being curious about too many things at the same time, but I have settled that my task is to find structure and order in this ever emergent leviathan of phenomena and things, and to put the strangest insights and most unexpected combinations up on display.

3. ZEITGUISED is widely considered to have started a genre that is now dominating the realms of Instagram and NFT art alike. Also your exhibitions and NFT exhibitions have received high attention and recognition. What do you think of the current achievements?

I consider this another opportunity of the moment seized. The style you are talking about "abstract realism" back then - abstract, dynamic spatial geometries presented in a photographic realism documentary style, to my knowledge that didn't exist in that form at that point but many picked up on it soon after. It is though part of a long artistic line of traditions that include trompe l'oeil, surrealism, cinema and others that tried to cross over from visual surface effects into abstract and conceptual art, from narratives with human subjects to narratives that are hallucinatory and that follow their autonomous and inherent formal logic.
The rise of NFT art remuneration gave me a boost to tend more to the artistic projects that are dear to me and I have plans for further development for, as I had spent the last 15 years putting bread on the table with commercial projects. Surely successfully so, but commercial success was also the guise of the devil, as it consumed the best parts of being creative and attentive and stifled true creative development. I never thought I would say that, but there, I just did. Yet we just didn't have NFTs 10 or 20 years ago and the "art world" wasn't even interested in showing digital art back then, even if it was for free. And look at the gallerists licking their fingers with ethereum signs in their eyes now…haha. But basically I had missed the whole initial explosion of that market over a year ago, even though I was a proponent of it when the concept of unique blockchain art emerged a couple of years back: I was already in talks of securing our artwork and making it collectable and sellable via blockchain tech in summer of 2015. So right now, I have to play a bit of catch up but the communities are great and the possibilities are virtually endless. Looking at the Bread Prosthetics being published now, that was a concept from 2018 but I never finished it, and I am happy about that as it seems that would have been too early and now these feel just right for the moment, with the overall state of our hearts and minds during this pandemic. I am also well chuffed about the rumpelgraph, as this has been a dream from my days as an architectural student come true, this combination of autonomous machine that takes other artwork as inspiration and makes a complex dynamic architectural configuration out of it and sells the result as unique NFT editions - that form of unasked for aesthetic prosthetic, or virtual vandalism as an art form, I am glad to have seized that as well :)

4. You are from Germany and Dresden in Germany is "the spokesman of culture". What impact do you think the German art and design environment has on you? Who is the initiator of your art design Enlightener?

I am very critical of "the" German art and design mindset - as it is too critical! It is hard to find German collectors or curators who understand my approach here, as it seems too light hearted, and too technology oriented. These main components of my work, emotional warmth, conceptual lightheartedness and technological advance don't go down well in the German art bubble, not as single ideas and certainly not in that combination. One rather walks the much trodden paths of gravitas, heavy thinking, along the lines of Heideggerian cultural pessimism. I was lucky though with some of my German teachers in art school and later as an assistant professor at university. They taught me conceptual thinking can also be fluid and agile like dancing, and I certainly like dancing. A lot.
But to answer your question shortly, from my point of view, German cultural society for the largest part has a lot to catch up to.

As an impact, that german cultural environment of hypertrophic seriousness seems to have had a good influence on me, as I think for me it was like living in the desert but I was craving water, plants, life, and kept looking for it outside of this desert, but I was also able to find it within,

where “the sun don’t shine” and no one was looking.

5. You said "don't be afraid". Is that your philosophy of life? For all things, keep the spirit of exploration and curiosity, and the coexistence of sensibility and reason. You don't think you should be afraid of trying and innovation, so as to inspire people around you and affect more future generations in the industry. What kind of person do you think you are in your life? What is the relationship between living space and your creative space?

First of all, I want to make clear that I have fears in me that horrify and stifle me so much, that everything I do could be seen as overcompensating for it, running around fear- and headless until I crash into something. So yes, fearlessness is one big recipe for (productive) disaster in my work. I consider myself inclusive, a Yes person, and quite fearless at times, risk taking. As an affection driven person, I seek and enter an emotional relation to art, with all the heavy cost attached. There is always a bill you have to pay, at the end, for everything. That brings certain stressors into my life, but good therapy and the pandemic have taught me a much better balance and I have since discovered creative productivity is even more easy and enjoyable if I say No to distractions and put pauses in between my actions. Let the flow of things guide me, to allow complexity some space to develop good processes. Trusting the overall process is trusting the universe. So much for free artist life advice.

6. Throughout the 20 years from 2001 to 2021, what are your experiences about the development of digital virtual art industry? What are the expectations for the future of the industry?

How to keep that answer short…:) It feels those years were a mere precursor to the age of digital art, even though we digital artists of my generation were only the third wave of that movement, after the initial few in the 1960s, and the next in the 90s. For context, I was born nine years after the official digital art kickoff, the exhibition by Frieder Nake and Georg Nees in Stuttgart in 1965. I was only 12 years old when I coded my first generative line art in BASIC on a TO7-70 in 1986, and 14 when in 1988 I made my first abstract 3D rendering on an Amiga 500. My youth happened on both sides of the German wall and the internet, I experienced two distinct “befores and afters” after which things were never the same again. This is the same with the advent of the NFTs now. I think the last 20 years in digital art were just the warm up, now we’re at the ignition tip of a cambrian explosion of which we will only see the extent when we look back at it. Now we have an environment in which digital art can thrive, be seen, consumed, traded, collected, and it attracts many players, and a lot more are open and great minds, and this creates competitive pressure, which refines the thinking and the techniques and multiplies the ways of what digital art can be - but most importantly now it is merely art.

There are dangers though that I see, that of automatisation and “algorithmization” (I am pushing those as well myself, and have been for the past years). Not sure where that will lead, but it might put an end to us artists being able to make a living from making art, at some point, maybe not in our generation but the one after (not unlike the music industry perhaps), but that is not a major concern for me at the moment, things will happen as they happen, I don’t think anyone has control over this at this point any more. That genie will not go back into the bottle, whether we want it or not. Maybe the first superhuman AI or singularity will have its origin in an artwork, intentional or not, who knows?

7. With the rapid development from different fields of society, whether science and technology or visual applications, as well as people's great acceptance of social life and the need for more experience, digital art has split and developed different forms. As the cryptosphere continues to move

from the fringes to the mainstream, what do you think of the emergence and future development of NFT and Metaverse?

We can not overestimate the role NFTs will play in the visual arts as well as other art forms and even more, how we organize and distribute tools, tasks, productivity, wealth, the foundations of our societies, everything really. And think of the amounts of scam, of fraud and counter fraud, it's mind boggling. The metaverse as an idea will also not go back into the bottle. If you like Zuckerberg claiming tabs on it or not, it doesn't matter. I personally think decentralization will take care of that: there is vast potential there as a valid antagonism to the common business model that makes the open and free resource of interconnected information artificially scarce by fencing it off and creating dependencies to a subordinate ecosystem. As so many times in recent human history, there is the promise of autonomy and freedom that lingers around such new technologies, until the reality of the fearful human psyche kills it and packs it back to the other toys in the box of oppression, exploitation and alienation…we'll see. But things will never be the same again, I think we might not be able to recognize ourselves if we could look from each end of this change to the other.

8. In the future, what areas do you want to continue to try and explore, or what areas do you want to challenge?

In the last couple of months, I have been catching up working forwards through my backlog of projects and ideas that I want to publish consecutively. All projects are either in the area of autonomous artbots or virtual vandalism prosthetics, those fields remain my focus for the foreseeable future. These two poles at each end of my spectrum mark the distance that I want to explore: between the complex digital machine/algorithm as the origin of artwork (and hypothetically what it might mean at some point for the machine) on the one hand and the magic and complexity and limitlessness of human artistic improvisation, in tune and flow with the moment, being connected to physical space via digital prosthetics.