

Adam Jankowski

Field of Study
Art Education, Fine Arts

Period of Study
WiSe 1970/71 — SuSe 1976

Place of Birth
Gdansk, Poland

“The most beautiful
profession there is”



Adam Jankowski in his studio in Hamburg, 2023; photo: Anne Meerpohl

Anne Meerpohl/Eliane Kölbener

In your application for HFBK Hamburg in 1970, you wrote the following lines: "In the Hamburg University of Fine Arts, I have found the 'ideal case' of an artistic school that I had in mind, where there are opportunities for expanding knowledge, constructive design and critical engagement with the world in the form of dialogues of any dimension." How did you know that the HFBK Hamburg was the university you wanted? And what were you missing in Vienna?

Adam Jankowski

I became aware of HFBK Hamburg through my artist colleagues in Vienna and also through publications by artists who taught in Hamburg. Most of the artists who were working there at the time had once been exhibited at documenta and their shows were published in catalogs or magazines. I was interested in certain artists, especially those from a neo-constructivist or conceptual direction, including Almir Mavignier, who struck me as an interesting, constructive Op Art painter who was not frozen in dogmatism or schematism. At that time, you could only really take proper note of things in the original, because the publications mostly provided black and white illustrations only.

The Viennese avant-gardist Marc Adrian was a visiting professor in Hamburg at the time and told me about the school. I also knew Herbert von Buttlar, then president of the HFBK Hamburg, from his documenta activities. In 1968, the Vienna Academy of Art was for me a very post-war influenced, anachronistic and reactionary bunch with boring professors who showed no interest at all in the current discourse on painting. The obligatory art movement there was the Vienna School of Fantastic Realism. For me, that was a contradiction in terms, and I also found the petty-bourgeois idea of painting as a "German craft," which was strongly influenced by National Socialism, repulsive.

Anne Meerpohl/Eliane Kölbener

Did you start your art education in Vienna?

Adam Jankowski

Yes, I did. In Vienna, I was sometimes enrolled in this and sometimes in that. I didn't care about the name at all. I wanted to become a painter and told the secretary something that I hoped had a chance of getting me a place in a class. When I was still at school in Vienna in 1964, I got to know the very progressive sculptor Kurt Ingerl. Sometimes I helped him out in his studio and he took me to openings. Other artists came to visit, we stayed with them or sat together in a pub. As a result, I was already fully involved in the art scene at 16 and already knew what art was and what to expect when becoming an artist. Or what being an artist meant. Therefore, moving to Hamburg was a liberating step into the international art scene for me. I wanted to be part of the young art scene, which was on the move at the time. It was 1968, the youth revolt had turned the world upside down, and I wanted to be part of this positive mood, learn something and join in.

Anne Meerpohl/Eliane Kölbener

What was the mood like in Hamburg and in your environment at the time?

Adam Jankowski

It was split, because the Hamburg scene was already shaped and supported by somewhat older students. I quickly made friends with artists from the so-called Gruppe Montag, i.e. Tomislav Laux, Dieter Rühmann and Jörg Heidemann, who had an exhibition at the Kunsthalle at the time. There was a politicization going on throughout the university. There were huge red posters with white or yellow lettering everywhere: "Communists into the student parliament." Various different "communist" groups were active: the Marxist Student Union Spartakus, i.e. the GDR supporters. And then there were some obscure groups from the field of esotericism: followers of Bhagwan, Maharaji or Hare Krishna sat in the canteen next to the Maoists and the DKP-affiliated groups. That was the zeitgeist at the academy as well as at the university.

Anne Meerpohl/Eliane Kölbener

And did you belong to any group?

Adam Jankowski

Yes, at some point I realized that I also had to take a stand. I gradually politicized myself and oriented myself towards the groups that were critical of the Soviet Union and the GDR, i.e. the Maoist groups. But it has to be said that these Maoist groups basically had no idea about China and Mao, they only had Andy Warhol's great images in their minds. There was a lot of misconception and projection and hardly any knowledge about the Cultural Revolution and Mao's crimes. It was more a zeitgeist, a fashion or a mood, more pop than political.

Anne Meerpohl/Eliane Kölbener

Your first professor Almir Mavignier accepted many international students into the class. How did this come about and to what extent did it contribute to the politicization of HFBK?

Adam Jankowski

There were sometimes more and sometimes less international students in the class. Almir was popular. He came from Brazil, he had come to Hamburg via Paris and the Ulm School of Design and spoke very little German. Nevertheless, he was very, very German in a way. He once said to me: "I consider myself a civil servant of art." At that time, many students came from abroad, from countries that had been destroyed by cruel political developments, and Mavignier had a lot of understanding for that. There were military coups in Chile, Greece, Argentina, and many other places in the world as well as the Russian military intervention in Czechoslovakia, and so some students fled to Hamburg.

Anne Meerpohl/Eliane Kölbener

Was the class also politically active?

Adam Jankowski

The class was rather divided. There were also agitators or very political students, some of whom had also studied philosophy or sociology at university and had the relevant theoretical background. But there were also many apolitical students who were confronted with political slogans and had to justify themselves. So the arguments were exchanged back and forth. It was all a great learning process, which also took place through the political circles and the working groups that emerged from them. For example, the reading group in which we read and analyzed Karl Marx's *The German Ideology* together, page by page, sentence by sentence. This was a way of learning history, German, grammar or whatever you wanted – and all voluntarily. In addition, committee and student council work played a major role: student co-determination was a huge topic, and we were able to have a say in certain funding decisions and appointments.

Anne Meerpohl/Eliane Kölbener

Did these political and theoretical standards also have an influence on your artistic practice?

Adam Jankowski

Overall, it was a deep learning process for me, and my art changed quickly. In your early 20s, you develop at an incredible speed, and my painting had become more open, also towards political content. I started out as an abstract artist and was confronted with the arguments that art had to be understood, also by “normal people” and not just the educated elite, otherwise it wouldn't have an impact. So we had to open up art, so to speak, and try to make it more comprehensible and incorporate topics into art that had to do with general developments in society. For example, militarization, the Cold War or nuclear energy and its destructive power.

Anne Meerpohl/Eliane Kölbener

How did the 1973 exhibition *Foreign Students at the HFBK* come about?

Adam Jankowski

The proportion of international students at the university was high. Many were on the run or in transit due to the political situation in their countries. Of course, they all had major problems. Above all, there was a lack of money. The second problem was residence permits. How long can you stay? There was also a lot of xenophobia. That's why the issue of solidarity among each other and the German students was extremely important. When the problems became more frequent, especially with the residence permits, a working group of foreign students was set up. Anyone could join, the groups were always open, and someone suggested that we could also put on an exhibition to show what we produce artistically. And link it to the question of how we can provide information about the conditions in our countries or in the cultures we come from. It was also an attempt to publicize the problems

and concerns we had here. That was the background to the exhibition, and I think there were also funding opportunities through the AStA. Some activists organized everything, sent out the registration form, printed posters and made the catalog. Again, anyone could take part, in this case anyone who considered themselves a foreigner.

Anne Meerpohl/Eliane Kölbener

The catalog brings together 23 foreign students.

Adam Jankowski

Unfortunately, not everyone could take part, there were some who were afraid to come out as “foreigners,” partly because they were here “illegally,” partly because they feared disadvantages in the future.

Anne Meerpohl/Eliane Kölbener

What was your intention in taking part in the exhibition?

Adam Jankowski

I had painted this large-format picture on the subject of international solidarity, using the example of the International Brigades in Spain in the 1930s. I was the spokesperson for foreign students at the time. If someone had difficulties with the immigration authorities or residence permits, I went with them or spoke to a lawyer who specialized in the rights of foreign students. As an Austrian, I was a German-speaking foreigner and could act as a kind of translator and mediator.

Anne Meerpohl/Eliane Kölbener

You later switched to KP Brehmer’s class, what made you do that?

Adam Jankowski

I saw a solo exhibition of KP Brehmer’s political works at the Hamburger Kunstverein and I really liked it. That was also Pop Art, but in the version of Capitalist Realism. I also felt I belonged to it and I was interested in the group around the gallery owner René Block. In addition to KP Brehmer, this included Joseph Beuys, Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Konrad Lueg, KH Hödicke and Wolf Vostell. All artists who interested me. Brehmer was simply a very nice guy, so we quickly became friends.

Anne Meerpohl/Eliane Kölbener

And how did you perceive the teaching and the class?

Adam Jankowski

The class was rather unconventional and without any rigid structure. Although there was something like a scheduled time for a discussion or a seminar, people tended to meet spontaneously in the afternoon in his lecturer’s room. There was always something to drink there. He knew a lot of artists who joined him. Whether it was the French conceptual artist Robert Filliou or Dieter Hacker, Sigmar Polke,

Dieter Roth. Actually, whoever happened to be in town, for example for an exhibition or just passing through, came along. We always went together to the nearest pub. We students were usually invited by the established artists – they were still all men, even though the first female artists who would later become successful graduated around this time. We exchanged ideas, talked and learned on a friendly level. You could also make appointments with some of them and then meet up again the next day to talk about their work and your own.

Anne Meerpohl/Eliane Kölbener

In 1986, you founded Galerie Vorsetzen together with KP Brehmer – in the premises where we are now having this conversation in – and where your studio is also located.

Adam Jankowski

Yes, that's right. That was about ten years after I graduated. In 1986, we thought that we actually needed a window to the world. At the time, there was a lot of hype about the Neue Wilde, these "pseudo-expressionists." We worked more conceptually and therefore had less publicity. But we were there and decided to create this window for ourselves. The founding group consisted of the artists KP Brehmer, Anna Oppermann, Dagmar Fedderke, Constantin Hahm, and myself, as well as the lawyer Herbert Hossmann and the art historian Gesine Petersen. We artists all offered our own work at a reduced price so that we had some starting capital. After a while, we sold a lot and built up quite a good reputation. For example, Miriam Cahn, who was still very young at the time, exhibited with us, as did Olaf Metzel, Ottmar Hörl, C.O. Paeffgen, Edward Dwurnik, Bill Viola, and numerous other friends and colleagues.

Anne Meerpohl/Eliane Kölbener

Did you stay in Hamburg because of this network?

Adam Jankowski

It was a result of the situation, because here – unlike in Vienna – I was able to exist as a young artist. Somehow I found a cheap studio in 1976 and was able to get by to some extent. It went on like that from year to year.

Anne Meerpohl/Eliane Kölbener

You yourself were a professor of painting at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Offenbach for many years. To what extent did your time at HFBK Hamburg influence your teaching?

Adam Jankowski

When I became a professor myself, I asked myself how my professors – at the HFBK and at the art history department at the University of Hamburg – did it. As a result, I thought a lot about the different teaching concepts and oriented myself towards the more informal, friendly culture of discussion, for example. I also

invited many colleagues to give lectures or look at students' works, such as KP Brehmer. I mainly tried to encourage my students in their personality and radicalize them in their practice. But the students developed in the direction that seemed appropriate to them on their own.

Anne Meerpohl/Eliane Kölbener

With your current life experience, what would you advise your 30-year-old self as an artist?

Adam Jankowski

That's a very difficult question. It's the most beautiful profession there is. And if you manage to get the freedom to pursue this profession, then you've actually achieved everything. But this profession and its rules are constantly changing, they are defined by society. That's why, in the end, you're always in for a ride. You always have to play along in the form that is currently in vogue. And always distrust the mainstream ...

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