Susanne Schuricht and Sascha Pohflepp with John Maeda

How much technology do we need

I think we need very little. I have my show for the Cartier Foundation, opens the 18th of November. I bought five Mac Minis to do my rendering for me. They are really inexpensive and i'll sell them on eBay next week, so it's all very very little cost.

I make moving images now, it's my new hobby.

If you woke up and were the Motorola ROKR, what do you think you would feel like?

[laughs] I'd feel bad, I'm a commercial failure then. I'd prefer to be a flower!

So you said that one kind of basic simplicity which is a goal of digital life would be "to be normal again", what do you mean by that?

Well, I think that the technology is like, a meter. When you add more money to it, add more coins, then somehow you feel you'd get satisfied. But I think maybe because you've been in this for a while, you feel the same, I don't really feel the desire to buy a new computer. I don't feel the need. I still hear people say, "Oh I got the newest", G-whatever or Pentium-whatever. I don't feel such a need. I think you have to free yourself from this artificial desire for more technology.

So do you think that the technology-revolution has been driven by engineers in a way, who just have a technological challenge in mind?

Oh yeah, I think that technology is about measurable progress and I think that you can always measure if something is faster, cheaper - that's why it's a great way to do business. But for the creative sector, I mean look at how big Adobe Acrobat is, it's 35 megabytes and it just displays an image. So the software adapts to the speed, it's not any faster, it's just more fat. That's kind of a problem.

Why?

Why?

Yes, seriously: why?!

Well, it's because...I think your point about how technologists made it that way, but also business models are built like that. Look at Adobe products: they haven't evolved very much. Remember when Adobe Photoshop or Adobe Illustrator was like version 3 and went to 4 or

5? There were big, big jumps - and suddenly, the jumps went away. It's just that you had to buy it beause they always changed and furthermore, you used to wait a year and a half to buy the new version and now you wait like every half year. So I think it's because MBAs got in charge of the whole technology world.

Do you think that this is coming from the belief that more is better?

I think it's because more is measureable, as a valuable outcome. Less is not measurable. What if Adobe said: New Photoshop CS3 with 80% less features?! [laughs]

In some distant future, might having a luxury life mean having a very non-digital life, less technology and less features?

Well, I mean it's kind of a paradox. We all want simple things when we start, but when we live longer with it, we want more. So it really is about how to design things that are able to change. People have talked for years about adaptible interfaces and so forth - it hasn't happened yet. But when that happens...at MIT we have new model for software, we have new system called Open Studio we're developing, that has made software simple again. Very simple drawing program, simple foto application. And then, most of the people ask us: we want more features! And it's designed to accomodate more features, you can easily add a new filter and you can buy that or rent that so the software gets as complex as you want to. In Photoshop I use 10% of the features, easily, maybe less.

So how can you market simpicity then?

I'm not only interested in marketing simplicity, I'm interested in marketing creative thinking. I believe that creative thinking is rapidly disappearing, because business is so focused on measurable outcomes and the economy is known to improve if reading and mathematics are strong in society. I think I've heard the same thing in Germany but in the US there's an emphasis on test-taking to determine the school budgets. What do the tests test? They test reading and math, so the schools are smart - if they want a good budget, they teach the right things so they remove music and art and gym. So the bigger problem is: how to we change the value of creativity? How do we get politicians to believe that greater creativity is good for the economy? Because if you look at all the literature on outsourcing, everyone says: "all the jobs are going to India, Romania, whatever, Pakistan, but don't worry, we people in the first world have this thing called creativity!", but the schools are removing creativity. So i think, the reason why I'm getting an MBA is to understand. What are they saying? How do they think? And how to you build a case for creativity as the basis of a very strong economy?

How could more simplicity help to cope with the enormous amount of information that the internet is throwing at us in the form of websites, newsfeeds podcasts etc.?

Computer's aren't designed to handle these information-streams. You can make the screen bigger and bigger and bigger but it doesn't get better and better and better. So, it's more a question of how all of our schools, all of our psychology, all of our abilities are not designed around the new medium. We don't know how to design for this medium and we don't know yet how to have art in this medium either. So, again I have to point out that the big problem is not in design- or art-schools, it's in the politics of the world.

Who could change this situation?

It's the task of the regular people. It isn't a task of the technologists or the artists. Regular people aren't aware that things could get better - that perception has to change.

But the companies don t want it to change this perception since it s easier to offer complex technology which claims to be able to do anything.

Yes, and you always feel inaedequate and that's the way the psychology of the market is. That's why then you have to change politics which affects education and business.

In a perfect world where you had all the power and possibilities to design a communication tool, what would that look like?

I don't think it's about a device or a design, it's about how we value things. Look at business, it's the biggest problem, especially electronics companies. Large companies like Sony or Samsung or Phillips, they're looking at the iPod and go "why didn't we get the iPod" - the answer is very simple: Apple is a computer company and they value software, internally, their management. That apprechiates creativity. In any consumer electronics company, software is the lowest because the CEO says "show me the product!". Marvin Minsky said once that DARPA, the defense department, when they used to fund artificial intelligence, would give a million dollars to AI and a million dollars to particle physics. Where they shoot a particle around a city in a gigantic tunnel and they're getting machines and whatever. And then they give a million dollars to AI-research and they get a magnetic tape this big. Which one are you gonna pay for? The average person would chose the particle physics. It's more about the psychology of the value of that which is invisible. Apple succeeds because their culture recognizes this, they see the difference.

If people are continued to be frustrated by machines, do you think that there s ever going to be some kind of backlash, maybe a generation that willingly says "no newsfeeds for me, please"?

I doubt that because young people are controlled by the entertainment industry. It's not gonna happen unless people of our generation take this on as the fundamental problem. It isn't about the art that we make, it's about the new political, social, business movements that we put into place. I mean, I make my art but I also work on this issue of how do we change the long-term world.

As for the simplicity-project we still don t really know what it exactly is going to be.

Oh yes, it's completely secret!

But so far it sounds like, I wouldn t say political, but...

Well, it's about trying to change the whole value system, around especially information technologies where less is actually measurably more valuable and more.

When did you come to realize that this step has to be taken? It s quite a step from generative arts to engaging yourself in politics.

The main reason is, I was very lucky, because in Japan I've had such good teachers. When I was doing these things, it was very rare and so my teachers all said to me that I would never know if I'm doing a good job unless I make new students that can come and destroy me. That was the whole idea, very Kill Bill-like. So I worked on making the next generation, I did that because I had the luxury of doing my own work and my students did their work. I built a firewall between me and my students and I protected them from all the politics. Most of them are doing very well today and I never wanted to stay in their way. I didn't wanna be a problem so I pulled out of that whole space.

So they didn t try to kill you?

Oh, some of them tried to! But I didn't wanna bother them. So now, years later I was just looking for new themes and I was lucky because of the Medialab. I was the associate director for a year at that changed my entire life because up until then, you know, I was a hotshot, I could make anything, whatever - and suddenly it's bam, there's a brick wall. Suddenly everything you know is worthless, suddenly, you're zero. It's like a straightjacket. So that taught me some very important things. That it's not all about just the beautiful things in life, it's about larger systemic problems. You know the famous computer-artist Michael Nole (?) at Bell Labs? He invented everyting. He really did! He did virtual reality, he did large-screen digital images, he really did everyting. But he quit in 1969 to work in Nixon's cabinet or something because he realized that his art didn't matter. It's how he felt. I'm not saying I agree with him, but it made me think that it's got to be about more than just the work, just the movement iaf

generative arts. But I still do everything. I do both, I make stuff but my real interest is how to make a future where...do you have any children?

No, I don t.

When kids tell their parents they want to be artists, the parents go crazy, they say "Oh no, are you sure?"

Become a politician!

Yes! [laughs] Become a politician, become a lawyer or something! So I want to imagine a future where a kid says "I want to be an artist" and we say "It's very good". That's very important for the political, social, business world. What if that world came to be? I'd like that world!

How would art education then be in that world?

I don't know, it's sort of incremental right now. So for instance at MIT, the new open studiosystem possibly will be able to make a case that you can teach economics and mathematics in the context of art. That's how we sneak into the elementary schools. Oh it's very important, the arts are important, because you can learn about buying, selling, economics. Some people would say "that's horrible, why would you want to mix it?", but the reality is: art's a business. Today.

Is there something happening on the web right now as well? The change towards the long-promised smart services like Wikis or the publishing power of the bloggers. Is there currently a form of reclaiming going on?

Yes. Think about that the computer basically graduated from a word processor, so it's very good at editing text. It's the most standard thing on the web, right? We're just seeing the outcome of the fact that the computer is noting more than a word processor today. But in the future the computer will have changed into something that the basic parts can support something beyond just editing text. But the blog-phenomenon is just linked to the fact that the UI of the computer is tied directly to that past. I think if you're talking about that, it's the fact that media outlets are marginalized by individuals, which is very empowering, but as you can see, if people want to make money off off their blog, they have to become just like the mass media. They have to sell out and advertise. And then they are reformatted to magazines eventually like some blogs are becoming together. There's reforms, so we disrupt them and come back. But I think that your generation may be looking for the big leap, but the big leap won't happen there.

What would that be, the big leap?

I think that the big leap is about when many regular people...remember Design By Numbers? I did Design By Numbers to teach people how boring programming is, that was the main point. Programming hasn't gotten any better. I have people from all over the world come to me to show me their Processing-apps. They're all the same, it's all just the same. So I think the fundamental problem is that the computer itself is not very flexible, it's very limited. So the big leap would be to make computers more imperfect, they are too perfect now. They are unable to accept multiple representations. One is one – forever. Two is two – forever. Whereas human beings, when we see something. Like, if i showed you this [scrunches up paper] and you looked at it, it would be many things in your mind, it could be this, it could be that. For computers it is only going to be one thing, so I believe that a lot of the computer future is being able to handle ambiguity. But that's not gonna come, because people don't feel that. Your generation starts to feel that right now. But now you're in the part of your career where you have to work, and work is defined into certain categories, so it's really a cultural problem.

Do you think that an influence of other cultures than the western has a chance of changing that view on technology in the future?

No, because they're adopting computers the same way. There's a Photoshop in every language in the world.

In India for instance, people take western technology and slightly but significantly tweak it in a way that it suits their culture and in some cases becomes something else.

But they are educated in the same western educational system. IIT, all of the main universities of India were based upon MIT. So i think that there are superficial differences, but fundamentally, the computer is a big sink. Like a plumbing system where electrons come in and they come out. Look at your faucet: you can make many variations of the faucet but what comes out? Water! [laughs] It's a bird, or a hawk or a tiger, you turn that faucet on – water comes out. That's the problem.

So is then the faucet or the water the problem?

The water's the problem! And also it tastes good the water, that's a problem.

And it makes things flow and you can transport things on it.

Yes, exactly, it makes things work. So you have regular constraints, you have a family, everything happens and suddenly that brief window of thinking goes away.

But if you look at Louis H. Sullivan s famous quote about how form will always follow function, meaning that technological development is usually followed by greater possibilities.

I used to think about that a lot, because there is so many variations: function follows form, form follows emotion, form follows form, function follows function. I haven't tought about that in a while. I think that I know what's right: this is all bullshit. What really matters is: people, friends, family, oxygen, water. And then everything else is fine! Once you get in touch with these things, it's much more real than any kind of breakdown about form, function, etc. It's just about being human. People always ask me "Are you a designer, are you an artist?". I'm just a person, there's no categorization neccessary. I can be a plumber. But life gets more complex, you can't stop it. Every year you get more tired, you get more busy, you have more piled on top of you. And you think: "Next year is going to be easier". No, is getting harder and harder. The most important skill as you're getting older is time management. Number one: color-code all your folders, it's very important! Green for work, purple for ideas, red for must-finish. And then the other rule of life is to cluster your time. If you schedule like 2 to 3 and like 5 to 7, it's bad. Put them all together and you save at least 30% of your day. It's the key to life, that's all!

Which also always had been the big promise of technology. For mechanical technology to increase your workforce and for digital technology to organize information and thus optimize your life.

Machines don't organize your life. People organize your life. Because we're complex. The computer thinks: at two o'clock it will be this, but it doesn't think about the context. Maybe they say in the future it will but I don't know. We keep changing, oxygen quality gets lower, the water quality is better, your friend is not your friend anymore. Now these are all very analogue quantities. Our mind is very analogue, so it's not digital.

That sounds as if up to now, everything has been pretty much a misconception?

It's a rehersal! [laughs]

But for what eventually?

Oh, it could be like a repeating rehersal. It could repeat over and over and over again! People believed that actually the world happened many times. I personally believe that it's not going to change. Look at schools today: the ones that are more digital, they can hire a faculty person that is good at, say, Photoshop 6, but after one year they get old. I found that at all the universities, the best students gravitated the old people because they have nuance that doesn't change. What happens when they're all gone? That's a big question in 10-15 years. So I'm just concerned about the school systems and the higher education as well. I think it's

those people who are in their 20s and 30s and 40s who have a chance of shifting the geopolitical, economical issues to this space. That's the challenge.

So in what way should the school system make people more literate then?

Just more now. More now than more ready for the future or ready for the past. I think that the idea of school is very synthetic. It's great being a student again! I'm a graduate student now and I've always liked to learn. It's so much harder to learn than to teach, so it has really opened my eyes.

You re doing an online program towards an MBA, right?

It's great! It's very hard, much harder than I thought. Like 30 hours a week.

So all the classes held are online, right?

Well, I have a team, we meet regularily in instant messaging. It's actually better than going to school, because if you're busy and you go to night classes, all you do is sleep there. So here I can work in the airplane, I can communicate, I can coordinate and it's a weekly.

But isn t this missing exactly your point of human interaction and the now?

Oh that? Okay, I'm doing it, so understand what's wrong with it. I'm not saying it's great. I do things to understand the state of the art, because some people talk about online education and did a research on it but they never took a class. Here I'm getting an actual experience of what is good and what is bad. I discovered that there's one common thing: either you're a good or a bad professor. And you got good students or bad students. If you have good students and good professors, great. Simple equation doesn't matter about the technology really.

I'm sorry that I have no answers. I hung up my mouse already. All my new work I made myself but I made it in a way that is honest. I use plain things now, plain obvious, no rocket science, it's my mess.

Thank you for the Interview Mr. Maeda.

Likewise. I really think that it's your generation It's not gonna be easy, otherwise it's gonna repeat. Over and over.