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sustainability and quality

An Interview from Susanne Schuricht with Joachim Sauter, 21.05.01, Berlin,
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Joachim Sauter studied at the Politechnical School of Design, Schwäbisch Gmünd and at
the deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin. Together with other Designers, Scientist
and Technicians he founded ART+COM in 1988. the at ART+COM created works have
been shown at ARS ELECTRONICA Linz, in Centre George Pompidou Paris, at the Museum
for Contemporary Art Sidney, the Museum for Contemporary Art Nagoya, at Siggraph New
Orleans and the "Interactive Multimedia Festival" Los Angeles, at the "G7 Meeting" Bruxells,
the Bienale Venice and have been won multiple prizes.

Since 1991 Joachim Sauter is Professor for digital media design at the Berlin University of
Fine Arts. Last year he participated in the Berlin-Hongkong-Festival, this year a summer
academy will be held in Hongkong.

Mr. Sauter, how did you get involved with the computer?

In 1984 the first useful computer appeared on the market, the apple classic.
I saw it, and thought this is what I want to work with. In the eighties we used
the computer solely as a tool. After that there came the possibility to do anima-
tion for films. In 1993 with the appearance of the Internet, latest, it became
clear that with this technology there also was a new medium.

Exploring the idea of interaction within a product of communication, only
possible through this technology, was the final impulse for my decision.
Not every generation has the opportunity, like the movie pioneers 100 years
ago, of defining the grammar, the vocabulary of a medium from scratch.

What encouraged you to study Graphic Design at a University of Fine Arts?

I began studying Architecture but realized soon, that it was not the right thing
for me. I continued with sports-sciences, musical sciences and philosophy.
Finally film. I recognized that it had be something with design, where I would
have the possibility of working conceptual creatively. At the end I made my
degree in Graphic Design at the Berlin University of Fine Arts.

That is how I developed my motto for life: "Detours expand your knowledge of
the locality." (laughs)

Do you think that the "New Media" need new schools, and if, what would these schools have to look like?

There is no need for new universities for "New Media". What we need are new teachers and maybe new courses.

Is interdisciplinary still an important approach today?

At the end of the eighties, beginning of the nineties this was an extremely important point. To develop a medially good product, one needed people from different disciplines like Architects, Scientists, programmers ... but not today. Now we have Media-Designers.

An important point in education and concerning the people I work with, is, they have to have their own position. One has to have a view, out of ones own position, upon the other media.
One has to understand the other media, but someone studying interactive media has to view film from his own point of view. That is another view, than somebody coming out of print would have.

If I want to communicate narrative-emotional subjects - I will make a film. If I want to communicate cognitive-rational subjects then it makes sense to do this with interactive media. Within this I try justify my style, merging subtlety with style.

New Media have the tendency of adapting older conventions of existing media. Do you think the web can be visually innovative or has it just integrated existing conventions?

That is just what had fascinated me, this medial language. The fatal thing is, that when one does not utilize the medium adequately and, for example, and puts a book right on to a CD-ROM, you have missed your aim of communication. If I communicate information on a CD-ROM, then I have to do this in a particular kind of way: interactively, with Hyper Links etc.
Naturally these processes use existing, valid rules of design, there are hundred of conventions - that are valid throughout all media. But additionally there is also a medial adequately dedication.

What is your current project?

There are a few. one I like a lot is - Call The Wall - is a transposition of the

mobile phone as everyday device, into a interaction-input-device. This project I am making for the Ars Electronica, Linz. The second project is a medial stage design of a opera-libretto "the Jew of Malta" of Marlow. There are going to be three projection-screens. The space is connected with the Protagonist, and when he changes his position, the room is moving as well. The protagonist is changing space through his movements.

Do you think, that museums have separated art from everyday experience?

Difficult question - wether museums do that, or rather the artist himself. It is not in general, the task of museums to be a place of confrontation. About things that do not relate to everyday life directly, but nevertheless have an influence upon life outside through the discussions they provoke.

Artist - Curator - the audience should not there be a mediator? Is media-arts not rather event-art then an art to exhibit? At the moment the Media-Art exhibitions at museums provoke a rather disturbing picture.

Well, the situation is, that current media-art indeed is event art because the curators of the festivals are often much closer to the subject than a curator from, lets say, the National Gallery.

My first project, "Der Zerseher" (english: "the Deviewer"), was a critic upon just this story. Most of the curators in the arts have not understood this idea of media-arts. They never got the point of this interactive dialog, process like art!

What happened was this: that classic, especially video artists were invited to media-festivals. They where encouraged to present interactive works. Imagine, the artists that had the least readiness of leaving their field. There have been fabulously shaming exhibitions where classic video-installations came equipped with an interaction-concept that in its triviality found no such.

Slowly this is changing, there is a new generation of curators approaching, that gradually reaches the position to start working in the right direction. This medium is existing since 15 years now an interactive-art is reaching back to the eighties.

Maybe an Ars Electronica curator should curate once at the National Gallery?

Yes, such preventions are often done by simple fear, such a hermetic view, not to let anyone from the outside in - clearly there is something new coming -

and - "I don't understand it, therefore I better ignore it" – Finally they invite something known from hearsay. That is rather damaging then doing any good.

Please describe your first interactive installation "Der Zerseher".

The observer finds himself in a museum environment, a framed picture hanging on a wall. Upon coming closer, the viewer notices that exactly the spot of the picture he is looking at is changing under his gaze.

Our motivation for this project was the fact that, at the end of the eighties, people were still looking at the computer primarily as a tool and not as a medium. The painter exchanged his brush for the mouse, but he used it to do almost exactly the same things that he once did on an analog basis. For us this was art with computers, not the beginning of computer art. By purpose we have chosen the traditional museum environment. Also by purpose the painting we used was chosen: "Boy with a child-drawing in his hand" by Francesco Carotto. This painting shows the first documented child-drawing in arthistory - an adequate metaphor for the state of computer-art at the early nineties.

In the past an old master might leave an impression in the mind of the passive onlooker - now the onlooker can leave an impression on the old master.

With this installation we have thus tried to promote one of the most important media qualities of the computer, namely interaction.

Do you believe in the "Virtual Gallery"?

No. Not at all. If one can exhibit video-installations, then one can also exhibit interactive art. I believe that there is the possibility to exhibit interactive art in the classical sense. Successfully presenting this on the web, usually failed and remained a try.

What is the difference between art and design (Gestaltung), for you?

Gestaltung is living from its understandability, from its quick understandability - direct understandable communication, that transports its content directly. Art tries to encrypt and just through the process of decryption, simply through the intense contact with the piece of art, one experiences enlightenment.

The question wether something is usable or not, is produced out of own intentions or upon request, is not a question of art.

What do commercial projects mean to you?

Commercial projects are an amazing field, where one can explore the medial language, the paradigms and patterns that do exist - and how to use them. What does interaction mean in this case - and how do we employ it? They are pieces to be utilized. people will handle them - and it has to be more meaning-ful for them, than being presented with the classical medial form.Often we have been nasty, (laughs) trying to move the client positively into other directions - and at the end everyone was happy.

You are defining yourself as an "Gestalter". Where do you see the difference to the Designer?

The Designer: the prefix "de" means to deconstruct something, to take it apart. To take a sign out of its own context at set it into another. The Gestalter: tries to grasp the essence of a problem and then tries to find a corresponding shape (Gestalt) for it. Its an act of balance, but I rather try to develop the shape out of the problem, than placing the shape upon it.

Within the next ten years everything will have vanished into the ceiling or the walls. Technology will have disappeared virtually from our field of view.
What kind of consequences will this have for the Designer?

We know the path: personal computers in the eighties, mobile computing in the nineties, and now we have ubiquitous computing. The computer is everywhere.

That has consequences for product-designers as well as for Communication-Designers. Within the object itself lies, lets say, an inherent intelligence. For example the cup I am drinking from, is not only a container for what I am drin-king, but can probably "recognize" how much liquid I still have to drink today, after it has felt my hand. that has consequences: The Gestalter is not only giving a shape or trying, like an information-designer, to communicate content in a formal intelligent way, he has do design a process now.

We are all becoming process-designers.

Processes - Have you seen interesting examples of this idea: process design?

The design of a process is THE idea of design in general.

Good process design: creating a web site, where one not only clicks oneself through hierarchies of information, but where this information reorganizes itself for the visitor, and is therefor dynamical. Wether its the think map from plumpdesign or sinnzeug - there are some beautiful examples.

What do you think about john Maeda's current book?
(John Maeda: "Maeda @ Media", Thames & Hudson)

There are exciting experiments in it, like the "computer theatre", these are projects, that go deep into the substance of the medium. Sometimes I don't agree with his visual language, though the imagination and ideas behind it are very good.

John Maeda has this computational design approach, the form develops out of the programming code, that is very exciting.

What was your experience at the Berlin-Hongkong-Festival last year?

On one hand very positive, on the other a bit frustrating. The little frustration part of it was, that Hongkong is aiming to develop a second industry besides trade. Very wisely they decided this part should be media and communication. They invested a lot of money - though everything into hardware - instead into wet ware (people). Education concerning hardware is excellent, but the staff is very small. We spoke with many students. They are not very open for explorations, they first adapt, before they explore. We, on the other hand, lack this. We start experimenting right away, without having the basic knowledge.

I think east and west can learn in this point a lot from one another.

This summer a few people from Berlin will go to Hongkong to hold a summer academy. What is going to happen there?

This summer academy is going to be held by Prof. Tanja Diezmann, Nikolaus Hafermaas, Prof. Dr. Claudius Lazeroni and myself.

There will be workshops concerning the topic "city".

Probably there will be an exhibition, perhaps a publication.

Do you like to live in Berlin?

Very much, especially since the wall has come down. I had enough offers and possibilities going abroad, but I liked to stay here.

Thank you for this interview.

links:

www.artcom.de
www.plumpdesign.com
www.maedastudio.com
www.sinnzeug.de
www.digital.udk-berlin.de