THE REAL ADVENTURES ARE IN THE NET

The Berlin art historian Karin Rase talks to Henning Eichinger

As a painter and University Professor, Henning Eichinger has worked for many years with themes which cross over the borders between art and science or art and technology. He investigates the intuitive and emotional components of scientific and technological developments.

Since 1997 he has been Professor for Drawing, Design and Artistic Conception with the faculty of Textiles and Design at Reutlingen University. In his artwork and with his students at the university he works on artistic responses to the important developments within society. His consistent art projects relate to various themes. For example the project "Fabry-Eichinger: Medicine and Aesthetic" for the Wilhelm Fabry Museum in Hilden, where he drew comparisons from the Renaissance surgeon Wilhelm Fabry with current day plastic surgery. In the artistic research project " Skypetrait: Transcontinental Faces“ Henning Eichinger and six of his Master students from Fine Art Conception, investigate how digital media have changed our world. The project started in March 2012 in cooperation with Dr. Maggie McCormick who heads the Master study program Art in Public Space at RMIT University in Melbourne, and with the Goethe Institute Australia.

Karin Rase: What does the name Skypetrait actually mean?

Henning Eichinger: Skypetrait is the joining together of Skype, (videophone via computer), and portrait. It was our intention to make an atistic connection between digital media, communication via Skype and portraiture. The use of digital games, communities, social networks and Skype are second nature to students today. A major problem in design is how to design in the Net, for example layout and pattern, factors like colour, speed, simultaniousness and diversity. In our studies we have the possibility to work consciously with these technologies and tools as a means of reflection and application.

Karin Rase: For the exhibition Fabry – Eichinger you painted portraits of Fabry's contemporaries like Galileo Galilei and Claudio Monteverdi, as well as current personalities like Michael Jackson and Dita von Teese. Why now portraits over Skype?

Henning Eichinger: We have many foreign students, for example, from Brasil, China or Eastern European countries, and because of this I can see that the world is becoming smaller. In the past foreign students wrote letters or used the phone. Even today letters to Brasil take at least a week and phoning is still very expensive, especially for students. However with a Notebook and Skype you can communicate immediately and for free. Even companies like Adidas, Puma or Hugo Boss with whom we often work, conduct interviews with our students via Skype. Another concept that is constantly discussed and researched by students and lecturers is how our world is changing through the use of digital media.

We put pictures on Flickr which can be taken and reused, we add to articles in Wickipedia, expose plagiarism, swap music, adapt films and dream of instant fame with our videos on YouTube. These activities have changed our concept of unbanity. Virtual towns and communities have been added to real towns and communities. The structures have grown out of the development of social networks and data collections like Wikipedia, Wikileaks etc., which further develop, enlarge and change through the swarm mentality of Open Sources.
In an age where students can count themselves as Digital Natives, who have no idea how the world functioned without the World Wide Web, I find it especially important that they learn how to work with it. I want to promote a conscious and creative way of working with these media.

Karin Rase: And what role does the use of portraiture play in this case?

Henning Eichinger: Another important theme, especially for designers, is identity. With the products they create, they produce real or seemingly real identities. This is one of the fundamental foundations of being human. When we consider identity as a combination of characteristics, which distinguish a person from others, we realise that alongside the possiblity of actual identities, virtual identities can also exist. Changing identities in the Internet, in chatrooms, communities and games is quite normal. Currently, representations in the
World Wide Web like avatars and characters allow me to happily live the various lives of a multiple-personality. We post fragments of self portraits every day on social media networks. Photos, texts and statements which are commented on by others, reflected upon, changed or reused. These things join together to create a virtual mosaic of our personality. In contrast to this we wanted to show the individual artistic portrait, whether it be drawn, painted or photographed, face to face so to speak. The portrait as the centre of our identity, but also a portrait which has passed through a digital filter.

Karin Rase: How did the cooperation the RMIT come about? It's not as though Melbourne is just around the corner from Reutlingen.

Henning Eichinger: I've known Maggie McCormick since 1997. She was the curator of an art project between artists from Berlin and Melbourne. The project was about cultural exchange and was one of the first projects to be concerned with globalisation. We stayed in contact with eachother and kept up to date with what the other was doing artistically. Every now and then we'd meet at exhibitions or other intenational art events. And then one day as I was trying to figure out how Skype actually worked, I wrote to Maggie and asked her how it would be if we got our students to draw eachother via Skype. She replied promptly with a long written concept which I added to and elaborated on, and so the idea was born. This time we were also interested in the cultural differences and differing styles of communication, which despite the directness of Skype still exist.

Karin Rase: You mentioned when we spoke earlier that you have used a special drawing technique. Can you tell me more about that?

Henning Eichinger: Yes, it's called Blind Contour Drawing. Maggie and I both agreed that traditional portraiture via Skype didn't offer a great deal of potential for artistic development.
Then I had the idea to use Blind Contour Drawing, which is a technique I have used in my classes for many years. The technique was developed by Kimon Nicolaïdes, who was born in 1891 in Washington, an American with Greek background. Interestingly, he was a camouflage painter for the army in the First World War. I also see a connection to our students here, as in our Textile and Design department at the university we train Fashion and Textile Designers. In his book, "The Natural Way to Draw“ Nicolaïdes describes the technique. While drawing you only look at the object being drawn. In our case, the person on the screen opposite. You are not allowed to look at or control what you are drawing under any circumstances. Normally, while drawing you constantly look from object to drawing to watch and control the development. Then, the drawing must be linear, without structure or shading. The pencil line must be fluid and the pencil must stay on the paper the entire time. It may not be lifted and replaced. So the lines inevitably cross over eachother and create new forms. The whole process lasts about 2 - 3 minutes. Later, the educator, artist and scientist Betty Edwards from the Centre for the Educational Applications of Brain Hemisphere Research at California State University, developed the technique further along more scientific lines. In her book "Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain“ she explains that using this technique especially stimulates the right brain hemisphere, which is responsible for intuative, visual, spontaneous, emotional and subjective thinking. This can be seen in the drawings. They are much more lively, exciting and individual than natualistic drawings. And I find that this fast and spontaneous way of drawing is a wonderful counterpart to our dealings with the Word Wide Web.

Karin Rase: Thank you for explaining that. Now I'd like to find out how it actually worked and how it was for the participating artists.

Henning Eichinger: Six Master students from the University of Reutlingen took part in the project and from RMIT there were also six participants, some students and some graduates.
There were three groups of German-Australian pairs which, one after the other met eachother online to draw. I developed a standardised protocol sheet which they filled out at each session. Noting the time, place, duration, disturbances or technical problems with the Skype connection, also personal assessments and experiences. The effects of the technical and personal, emotional factors are also important for me. Disruptions in the connection for example are technical faults, which the artists could use as design elements and therefore turn faults into artistic developments.

Karin Rase: I'm especially interested in the personal experiences and effects of Skype.

Henning Eichinger: As André Heller said, "The real adventures are in the Net." There were twelve artistic individuals, who had never met personally. They all started the Skype meetings very professionally, and over time as often occurs in life, discovered that some pairs worked personally and artistically well together, complement eachother, encourage eachother and together develop a new and fun approach. Two artists decided to dress up, in the same way as in the virtual world where one builds a personal avatar which doesn't show the actual person but a person's wishes and desires, they dressed themselves in various disguises and drew eachother. Blind Contour Drawing is not actually the main theme of Skypetrait. It forms the foundation for the participating artists to build upon. After the first meetings it positively exploded. Naturally everyone was curious to see the drawing done by the other artists. Which of course, is not a problem any more. The pictures were simply scanned and sent via e-mail and instantly everyone had them all. Then they weren't just looked at and set aside, instead they were added to and adapted further. They were drawn on, painted and worked on in image editing programs, then sent back to the original artist. Many of the most interesting pictures were created through a type of art ping pong. Another important factor is that I can Skype from anywhere using my Notebook. From a lecture theatre at the uni, from home, on the train or at a party. Many artists reported at the beginning that it was very strange to invite a stranger into their home for a drawing session. They started to think; what should I wear, should I clean up my room, how do I position the camera, what should I show from my living environment and what not? That made them sensitive to how they deal privately with this media, especially for the Melbourne artists as they are studying a Masters in Art in Public Space. Add to this the time difference. The Melbournians are always ahead of us, in summer by eight hours and in winter by ten. It's not always easy to get together and sometime you get the time wrong and miss eachother.

Karin Rase: That all sounds very exciting and the drawings, pictures, photos and other artworks that you showed me clarify and illustrate this process. Amongst the resulting artworks are also screen shots. Can you tell me how they came about?

Henning Eichinger: The screen shots where initially taken for documentation and out of artistic interest. Notebooks these days have a function where by you can photograph the desktop and save it onto the computer. The interesting thing with these photos was that not only the personal aspect but also the technology became a part of the theme. One example: a student in Reutlingen is drawing a student in Melbourne. What can they see on the screen? The Reutlingen student sees her screen on which is the image of her Melbourne partner and in the lower lefthand corner is a small picture of herself. She looks in the face of her Skype partner, who is wearing glasses and can see her own reflection in her partner's glasses of her image on his screen. When we look carefully at the screen shots they show us the

visualisation of the technological and personal layers which permeate through the whole project. I think that is a wonderful metaphore for the complexity of our times.

Karin Rase: Skypetrait has gained a lot of interest. There have been press articles and there is a facebook site, as well as the television chanel Arte who gave you use of their Website, ARTE Creative Room to document the project. What will happen with the results and how will it continue?

Henning Eichinger: As well as the documentation and exhibitions in the Internet there will be exhibitions in March 2013 in the City Library in Melbourne, in April in the Project Space/Spare Room at the School of Art, RMIT University running parallel with the international conference Drawing the Future, and in April and May 2013 we'll be exhibiting at the Reutlingen Town Hall. I'll be travelling to Melbourne with my students for the exhibitions there, and we'll be giving lectures and presenting the works to the public. We'd like to get people talking about our project and get them interested in supporting further projects. So far there is further interest from RMIT University, also from Deakin University and the Chisholm TAFE Institute in Frankston. This is naturally a wonderful opportunity for our students to gain experience and make international contacts. In May, three of the Melbourne artists are coming to visit us in Reutlingen and in November 2013 Maggie McCormick will be our guest at Reutlingen University.

Karin Rase: I look forward to hearing more about Skypetrait. Thank you very much for this interesting discussion.