

Digital artisans in interview: Alexandra Jugovic, Hi-Res! Completely involved but also always left alone

"Center of the World" and "Requiem for a Dream" - their conceptual realizations of the online-presence of those both movies brought London's digital-media-company Hi-Res into global spotlight. Both sites found entrance in digitalcraft's webdesign-collection and we were interested in getting more to know about hi-res! Peter Müller spoke with Alexandra Jugovic of hi-res!

In which areas is Hi-Res working and how did it all start?

Actually we are not coming from the classic web design area. We initially got to know each other at the Arts College in Offenbach. Florian was enrolled there in product design and I first in arts and then in graphics design. Together we developed 3D animations and later we worked in music production. There, among other things, I designed logos and covers, while he was directing commercials and music videos. After we had worked hand in hand there already, we finally started our own business in 1999. Until about two years ago we thus did not actually bother about web design. At the time we were not even much interested in it. It was mainly based on mere html and we saw it as being too static. Only with Flash we saw the possibility to realise all that is connected with motion design. That way we created our first own projects, such as for instance Soul bath. Yet we wanted to do something good only for the fun of creating. Well, Soul bath became then quite a success. Suddenly we received emails every day, nobody knew where they came from. By now we have more than 12 million hits and have already stopped thinking about their origin. Actually the whole thing for Hi-Res began with Soul bath.

If you look at the commercial projects which you are causing great stir with in the meantime, particularly the pages for the films "Center of the World" and "Requiem for a Dream", one will immediately notice that those are no standard presentations. The determined course of the navigation almost creates a film of its own in the web. How come did you choose this way?

Darren Aronowsky, the director of "Requiem for a Dream", contacted us personally. He congratulated us via email for Soul bath and proposed we should make the webpage for his new film. In Soul bath he had seen elements – the page's stage-managed disintegration in particular – that would also correspond to it. According to this we developed a plan with him, even though we hadn't yet seen the film. We roughly knew about the story and that it was based on a novel by Hubert Selby, who Darren also had written the script with.

In a post-production firm we were then able to see it, but we had to send back the reels straight away. Artisan Entertainment, the production firm, received a concept paper from us after consulting Darren and was very enthusiastic about it. We were more than bewildered. Eventually we were left to do what we wanted and also Darren did not interfere anymore.

Those two pages represent almost a pioneer achievement in the field of commercial advertising. Were there certain references, for instance in web art, where strategies such as the fake or variants of aesthetic deconstruction are used at least in part?

No, not as regards art in the web. In "Requiem for a Dream" we first intended to find analogies to the film. The portal TappyTippons.com, which our webpage for the film begins with, has its origin in a TV-Show of the same name, which is important at the beginning of the film. We had set ourselves the goal that the page should also make

sense without the film, but of course it should also be interesting for people that have seen it. Since "Requiem for a Dream" is about decay, addictions and compulsive behaviour, we investigated at first.

We tried to find similar things in the internet and found the so-called online gambling and other forms of addiction, as well as pages that offer a forum and help for their dependants. It was interesting to see what morbid patterns the medium is able to create in its users and in what addictions they get into. One has to imagine this: a completely new medium, but some users very soon slide into stereotypes that one knows from other places and contexts. Therefore, at the beginning of the Flash page, we translated TappyTippons into a game portal, since in the film it is a TV game show.

So you intend to demonstrate that interactivity doesn't necessarily mean to be in control of one's own actions?

What we actually want is to make people aware of what they are looking at in the web. Through the page's disintegration during the Flash animation – in the end you are even thrown out- not only the fate of the film's figures is to become clear again: You are completely involved but also always left alone, in particular by those who have provoked this state. At a certain point you can't go back anymore and stand there, left alone.

In your projects do you see elements pointing the way for internet advertising?

I reckon that this connection of art concepts and advertisement will gain importance. "Mind the Banners" for instance was sponsored by a giant firm in Japan, NTT Data, and they put their logo very small into a corner. We had almost absolute freedom, we just had to integrate a banner saying "love your questionmark". That was it. Completely different was "Center of the Word". The project was created in close teamwork with director Wayne Wang. He even made the photos for the page and the stripper was not an actress from the film, but a real porn star who was cast only for the page.

Thus your film pages always result from a close teamwork with the director?

Darren for instance had rather clear ideas. Wayne in comparison knew little about internet advertising and eventually it was the production firm Artisan that pushed forward the job. But afterwards Wayne Wang was that enthusiastic that he thought about integrating the page into his film. If it is eventually mentioned in the film's final version I don't know, though, since he apparently cut and changed the film 25 times and we have seen only a raw version on VHS up to now.

Can you actually say that in small or medium sized production firms people concentrate better on their work than it would be possible within a big film production?

In our experience, yes. I recently had a conversation with somebody about a similar phenomenon. We spoke about LPs cover design and found out that smaller labels often bring out much better covers. Successful musicians though, who mostly release on major labels, often release covers which are badly designed, with lousy typography and awful photos. That seems to be more than enough, since they sell millions of copies anyway. I think that in smaller labels the attention and importance dedicated to the designed product is much higher than the interest in money. That's a reason why many designers are willing to work for little or even no money –also because they can use the work for their portfolio. I reckon this phenomenon is surely transferable to the web. Also there

the so-called giant pages often look dreadful and it will certainly take some time until this changes.

Finally I would like to know whether you put up with the labelling of being "digital artisans" or do you reckon this is an unsuitable description for your work?

Quite frankly I do have a problem with the definition "artisan". It sounds pretty old fashioned and close to manual skills. I would rather define our work to be an intellectual performance. Maybe I would describe us as a "crafty team" in the means of the implementation of digital skills.

Lately we are often asked: "Is that what you do actually art?" Difficult question. But what is art? To me, works are then worth while when they give something to the spectator. Somebody said that it is art in the very moment one wants to make art. What we do is clearly advertisements for the film and music industry. We have an experimental, conceptual approach, though, but still it is very difficult for me to actually say: "Yes, we make art". But maybe I simply do have a problem with the labeling "art", as to me it seems to be overused. As frequently as we can we do work for non-commercial projects. hi-res! then plays the innovator and the client role at the same time. Lately we created an interactive installation for the 'London biennial of moving images 2001' called 'semi-detached', which was shown in a gallery at London's Hoxten Square. After all you do get judged for your most recent work.