

Digital Artisans in interview: Michael Schmitt, Kaliber 10 000

Nothing to do with rockstar-business

Being a fusion between an online magazine and a forum, Kaliber 10 000 or K10K succeeded in gathering many important web designers due to its special program. Michael Schmitt, Token Nygaard and Per Jorgensen, founders and steady editorial team of K10K, for three years presented one own, special issue in each new edition. A web designer, a group or an agency create these contributions, which may consist of a particular screen-saver, interactive animations or graphically enhanced texts – everything of course visually adapted for the web. In this way by now 116 issues have been collected, they are available in K10K's online archive.

Peter Müller took the opportunity and talked in Linz with K10K's co-founder Michael Schmitt, who at present is living as an independent graphic artist and web designer in San Francisco.

With the last issue of Kaliber 10 000 you raise the issue of the webdesign community. How would you define community life? Which are the typical communication structures?

The thing is that you have many kinds of different communities on the web. The webdesign community is only one of many, and most people cannot be grouped into any net community at all. Take my mom for instance, she uses the internet quite a bit. She does some online-shopping, sends e-mails, uses the Internet as an information tool. In my mind you could not say she is part of any global community apart from the fact that she is an Internet-user.

If you really want to talk about communities one has to go into niches. There you can meet people who love cult movies or some weird scientific aspect for example. Most people are still using the internet only as a tool like the telephone.

But how does one get to know other webdesigners? Maybe by special platforms for example?

Even though it may not seem so from the outside, I actually think that the web design community is really small. Sometimes it seems like it's mostly the same people travelling around in circles, with many doing five different projects under five different names. For example Joshua Davis does not only Praystation (www.praystation.com) he also does Dreamless (www.dreamless.org), Once Upon a Forest (www.once-upon-a-forest.com) and tons of other well-known projects under different names. But actually it is just one person, who is sitting somewhere pulling many strings.

There are a group of people who create tons of stuff and get invited to festivals like the ars electronica. But there are also a bunch of people, who feel that they are not part of a community, because they're still unknown. Of course they're part of the community, but they're anonymous.

Our most important communication tool is e-mail. People are spread all over the world, so e-mail is the big thing. It is also the way k10k is organized: Per is in Copenhagen, Token in London and I am living in San Francisco. The only way we can continue doing K10k is through email. We live in three different places in three different timezones and only rarely do we meet up, at festivals like these.

From which historical point the community started to develop her own life?

It was mainly a constant process. One could describe it as organic. I started out doing webdesign in 1994 which is quite a long time ago. A lot of the other people who create high-profile-sites started at the same time. In the beginning the community had no concrete name because it was so small. Finally about one or two years ago we started raising the community-issue.

Nowadays we have a ton of community sites similar to K10k, for example Surfstation (www.surfstation.lu), Three.oh (www.threeoh.com) or Pixelsurgeon (www.pixelsurgeon.com). People visit these sites for inspiration, linktips and to contribute to the community. When K10k started there only were two other sites, the japanese SHIFT (www.shift.jp.org) and DigitalThread (www.digitalthread.com). Today there are many and the community is growing.

Does a community give you a kind of backing in the design business and is a community necessary for the self confidence of webdesigners?

Community life has two sides: it can really back you up and give you support to increase the quality of your work, but on the other hand members can also tear you down quite a lot. That's one of the main reasons why k10k has been shut down for the last one and a half months, we were sick and tired of people criticizing most of our work. Maintaining k10k is a fulltime job and we basically were doing for free. So we decided to take a break for a while.

Everybody can become a online designer quite easily and get known instantly. It can happen very fast. If you create something exceptional, different from anything else seen before, in three days everyone around will know your name. Nonetheless, I think that webdesign should not be a matter of being known or unknown, it has nothing to do with rockstar business, there are no groupies.

Are there role models for webdesigners?

Lots of people think that Joshua Davis represents a role model. But he doesn't want to be that. He designed a very personal anniversary-issue for k10k, in which he told the story of his life and how he started his design career. For him it was important to state that he considers himself neither to be anyone particular special, nor totally different and that he dislikes constantly being in the spotlight.

Still I do consider him to be a role model, just like Matt Owens, the creator of Volumeone (www.volumeone.com). One of my favourite designers is Jeffrey Zeldman. He's been running a website since 1994 and is very involved in the creation of browser and cross-platform standardization. His work to me is very meaningful. But generally speaking there are not many designers who represent role models because the job of a designer in itself means the pursuit of very individual strategies just like it is in arts.

Can you localize geographic centers of creativity where to find particularly interesting agencies and companies ?

It seems to me that there are in fact such centers. I moved to London because it is an

important design city. San Francisco, Tokyo, Amsterdam and Berlin are too. These cities are indeed the big business centers.

Recently I saw some quite interesting russian work, so maybe Moscow will be the next big design city. But I think cities need a long time to establish a reputation like London has.

How would you define the so-called free webdesign compared to client work?

For me it's not a matter of money. You can get paid tons of money and still produce so-called free design. It really depends on the client and the creativity involved in the work itself. For example we are working on a project for a small record label for which our pay is almost non-existent, yet it is still a very fun project to do. We at k10k do not limit the creativity of the designers at all when we ask them to prepare an issue. There are no restrictions, no real deadlines, but of course if something is really bad we reject the publication. This only happened once fortunately.

That means, there is no necessary contradiction in between client work and free webdesign?

Definitely, and that concerns big clients as well. For example look at the site Digit created for MTV 2. The site is great and the Digit people told us that MTV gave them a chance to go completely crazy creatively-speaking. For them that was like k10k is for us.

K10K has a huge backissue-catalogue. Did you, Per and Token also want to establish an archive and through that initiate a kind of quality debate?

K10k was actually planned as a playground. Normally I hate multimedia "art" and most of the other digital art stuff. We just want k10k not to become too serious. If people want to spend hours and months thinking about the concept for a new issue: to us, it's great. But we also want to make room for people who just say: oh, I thought this animation would be cool for your site. I think we've achieved a good mixture of both. We never supported any sort of written debate, because we never felt that that was something that was important to us. There is some pretty heavy theoretical stuff on k10k, but this is due to the creator(s) of that individual issue.

In an interview you told that you really hate the fastgoing copying of brilliant works. Are there any "work-ethics", which could function as a kind of collective convention?

Indeed there would be a way out of plain copying, but what copyright legislation offers nowadays needs to be improved radically. Everybody has to start somewhere, but right now so much copying and imitation which is actually pretty bad is going on. People don't think about themselves and their work sufficiently. They also forget that you cannot produce good work just by ripping off something and putting it into a totally different context or just changing its content. In the community this attitude means theft.

How strong is the influence of classic print media aesthetics on webdesign?

Take a look at David Carson's work and you'll realize that he thinks in terms of print media. You can't decontextualize it and convert it for the internet. Print media has a large historic background. Consider print design and typography, it hasn't really changed

much in the last 50 years. Only the tools, like the Macintosh Computers, have been dramatically changed. There is a long tradition in print media compared to which there is no correlative for in online-media.

If you really want to do an effective online design you cannot just transfer all the principals of traditional print design and their specific rules, because that wouldn't work.

In the beginning we were highly influenced by print work, because there were hardly any webdesign influences to draw from. That doesn't mean that we went online with a site in the David Carson or Neville Brody style. Nevertheless individual style is build up by different inspriration sources that a designer accumulates over years. K10k could be considered to be inspired by Swiss graphic design, although we've modified it drastically.