Eno Henze interviews Eno Henze.

Let's first talk a little bit about your latest work. What is it about?

My last work is a laser drawing called "Subjekbeschleuniger" (Subject accellerator). It mimics the signatures subatomic particles leave in collision detectors installed at the CERN in Geneva for example. I have always been fascinated by the beauty and simplicity of these signatures as opposed to their invisible meaningfulness.
I use these shapes to create an image that still carries the symbolic reference of these signatures but that is dispensed from scientific interpretability at the same time. The drawing becomes a mere symbol for a very fundamental search. What we do at institutions like the CERN is the cutting edge of contemporary enlightenment - with all the debatable implications of this term ... So the drawing is not a scientific evidence, but rather an aesthetic evidence for our search for the absolute, for the fact that we want to know the rules that define the way our world works at its core.

Do you always employ such philosophical topics?

"The search for the absloute" features a characteristic property of my work, yes: my affection for philosophical and scientific concepts. I use them as a starting point for an aesthetic research or artistic comment. The other property is a more formal aspect that keeps reoccuring in my work: my collaboration with a machine or with the computer.

I just want to understand how 'our world works'. I've been reading "Spektrum der Wissenschaft" as a child and I am addicted to reading scientific journals today. It is not the functional inventions that fascinate me, but rather the recreations science produces on both aesthetic and utopian levels (very beautiful sometimes). I see the visual artefacts of science as an aesthetic challenge, but also to show that there are a lot of different takes on the concept of 'our world', not only one objective scientific interpretation. There is a subjective micro-universe in every one of us that defies scientific description. And scientific language becomes very philosophical and blurry when looking at either the smallest, the largest or the oldest parts of our universe.
This topology between art, science and philosophy is riddled with cracks and grab handles that invite me to criss cross between these disciplines. Using scientific signatures as an artist produces some kind of pseudo-science, that doesn't proof anything, but focuses on the aesthetic component of science and triggers a discussion about how scientification transforms our self-conception. The other way round, I use philosophical concepts or ideas and give them a visible shape, like I did in "der Wirklichkeitsschaum" (the reality foam).

Could you illustrate this with a concrete example?

Lets look at the pieces "When did you first feel the urge ..." and "Systemstrahlung" (System Radiation) that comment on each other and were exhibited in the same room. "When did you first feel the urge ..." is actually a reconstruction of an experiment conducted by the neuro scientist Benjamin Libet in the 60ies. A test person could choose to press a button at any moment - but he should remember the position of a circulating dot on a screen in front of him. Libet showed, that an unconscious activity in the brain preceeds every decision to press the button, and hence he questioned the concept of free will that had been fundamental to philosphy and religion for centuries (His argument was essential to the discussion of the philosphical implications of neuro science in the past decades).
The 'reenactment' of this experiment recalls this controversial thesis and transforms it into a minimalistic videosculpture, that obviously has its references in works of Nam June Paik (TV Buddha) and Dieter Kiessling (Star). On the opposite wall of this piece I had shown prints of the series "System Radiation". I had written a computer software that created an unlimited number of different drawings following a set of rules. I juxtaposed these two works, because in "System Radiation" the execution of my free will (by selecting which drawing was good and which was bad) was the fundamental artistic action. Without this selection the piece would just have been an illustration of a mere set of mathematical formulas, driven by chance.

In contrast, "Der Wirklichkeitsschaum (the reality foam)" ermeges from a philosophical idea, an abstract concept of reality that is not subject to scientific evidence - which I then tried to cast into a visual form. It is is based on the idea that every real thing is irreducible to a point, but rather constitues a multidimensional sphere - of meanings, of historic references, of deliminations and exlusions and so forth. This is how things and ideas manifest themselves in ideal space, being in a continuous dynamic state. From a macroscopic perspective the things of reality form a large aggregation of spheres, a foam in ideal space - the reality foam. 'Der Wirklichkeitsschaum' is an attempt o visualize the structure of our perception, or a formalitsic approach to our creation of reality.

These are very much human considerations. Why do you use a computer for your work, then?

First of all, to me the computer is a machine of abstraction. At it's core it operates completely abstract, with only two states of information: true and false. Through a process of enourmous complexification of the structure of this machine, we are able to address issues of a superior quality with it, a quality that does not look as if its was reducible to a binary logic. But in fact it is. So if I use a computer for subjective and sometimes vague issues as in art, I can only use it as an exterior entity. It's inhuman qulity becomes very apparent when I 'talk' to the machine. I have to condition my intention in a way the machine understands. Hence it is a sparring partner that forces me to translate my thoughts into a language of extra-human paradigms. This way, they obtain an absoluteness and abstraction that is impossible to achieve 'manually' - and in turn the untranslatable becomes obvious, too. Between human and machine is a border that can be crossed from both sides, each time transforming the quality of the crossing object, and leaving the untranslatable behind. It is a productive economy at this border, that constantly produces unanticipated results, on both conceptual and formal levels.

I like your image of the computer as a sparring partner. Can you tell me a bit more about this cooperation, and what it actually means for your production of art?

Aesthetically the formal de-subjectification produces results that have a specific 'autonomous' quality. The pieces I produce with a computer don't look as if they're made by someone, but they seem to be "just there". This is part of my intent. They are more a natural phenomenon than means of artistsic expression. I put something very personal, subjective into the machine, and I get something altered, something autonomous back. My sparring partner constantly challenges me with unexpected results and perspectives and demands quite some sportiness.

I've made several pieces that use foam or spheres as their key figure. As a structure foam had first entered my work as an idea and then visually as a computer generated drawing ("der Wirklichkeitsschaum"). Later I tried to develop a corporeal understanding of these computer generated forms by shaping them manually, such as in "Metaphysischer Grenzverkehr I" and "Kontingente Sphären". So you could say the topos 'foam' crossed the border twice, human - machine - human, being transformed each time.

The surface of "Kontingente Sphären" looks a bit like the Cortex series – What can you say about your Computer drawings in the context of your other works?

The computer drawings combine some of my preferences on a more intuitive level than the works we've discussed before. I think they represent even more a symbiotic cooperation between me and the machine, because they are dominated by the inherent conditions of the machine to an even greater extent. They are, of course, strictly rule based. It's mathematics and machine language. If, then … etc. But beyond this machine logic emerges a realm that is a lot deeper. In the computer drawings the original qulity of this space becomes most apparent, because they are stripped bare from any meaning - despite the titles I gave them that insinuate something else …

Practically speaking, I have a preconceived idea of a picture which I then translate and try to describe to the machine. But sometimes the machine returns something that is beyond what I had conceived before and beyond what I can make with my bare hands. But I wouldn't say that I become an agent of the machine. In the end it is only me who's in charge to consider what is good an what is bad. In this sense, it is an aesthtic research of the possibilities that lie in this cooperational field of man and machine. I am a breeder, rearing forms and shapes together with the machine. There are simple rules, iterated a great number of times - and suddenly there is more in the image than simple forms.

So when I say that the computer is the machine of abstraction, these drawings are about the joy of abstraction. That may just be the transgression of the border back into the space of human interpretation. You see something where there is actually nothing represented. You start re-humanizing something that is obviously meaningless. These drawings bear their own reality, especially due to the autonomy of their production process. I find this old, human source for satisfaction in contemplating on these abstract forms - and I give them names: "Grimm" (fierceness) and "Argwohn" (caginess) for example, both are in fact very hard to translate.

Of course I did take on the conceptual implications of this production process. But essentially these thoughts are subaltern to the process of creating these drawings. Based on emergence theory, the "cortex" series was intended to depict something like an "intelligent tissue" (such as the brain cortex), something that is very even and yet unpredicatble. And the series "The Human Factor" emphasizes the aspect of a machine made drawing. I tried to develop forms that look so divergent and errorful and unique, that you would think they are made by a human. But at the same time there is such a great number of these lines aligned in such precision, that only a machine can achieve. Teach a machine draw like a human and see waht happens …