

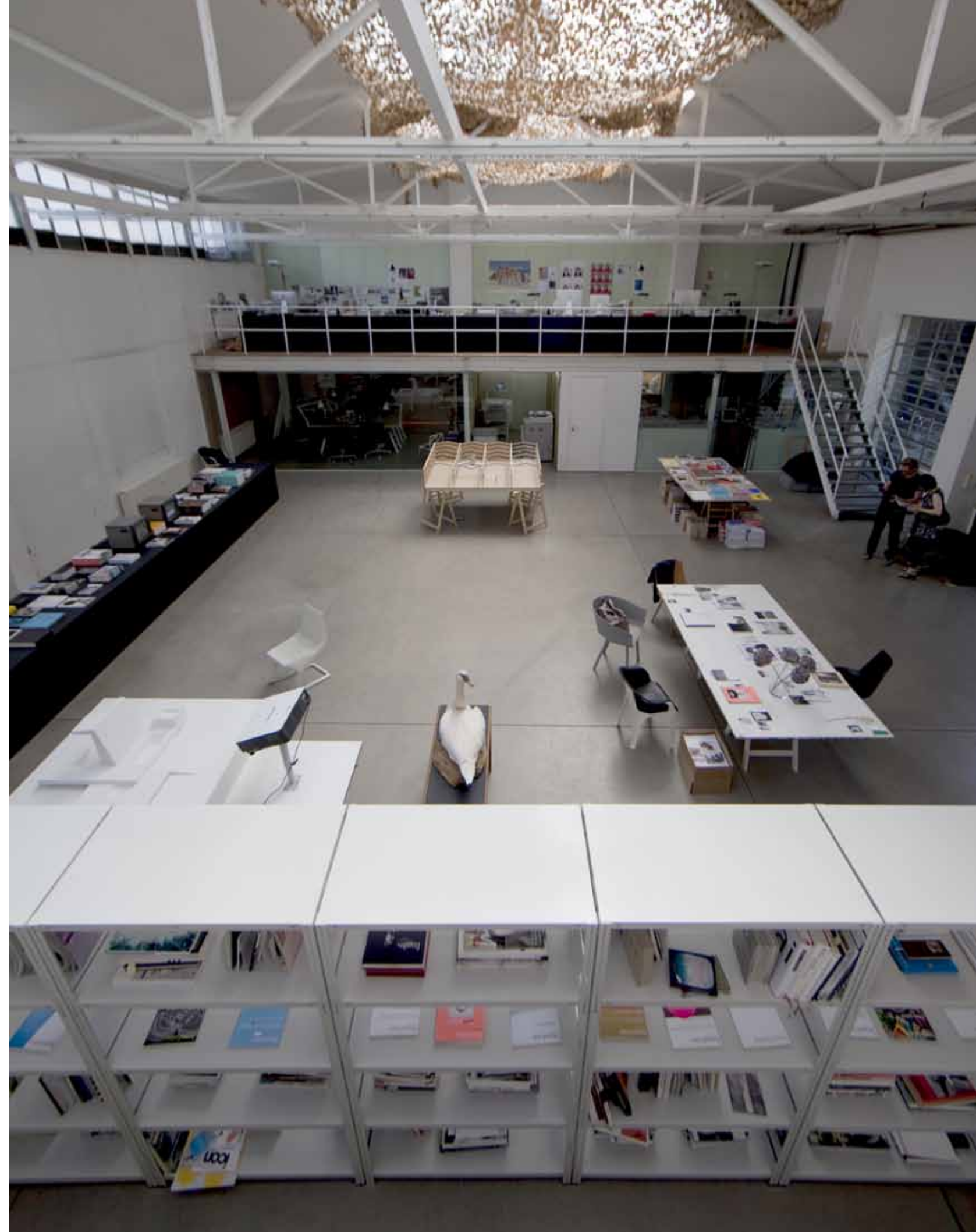
MEETING
NO. 1

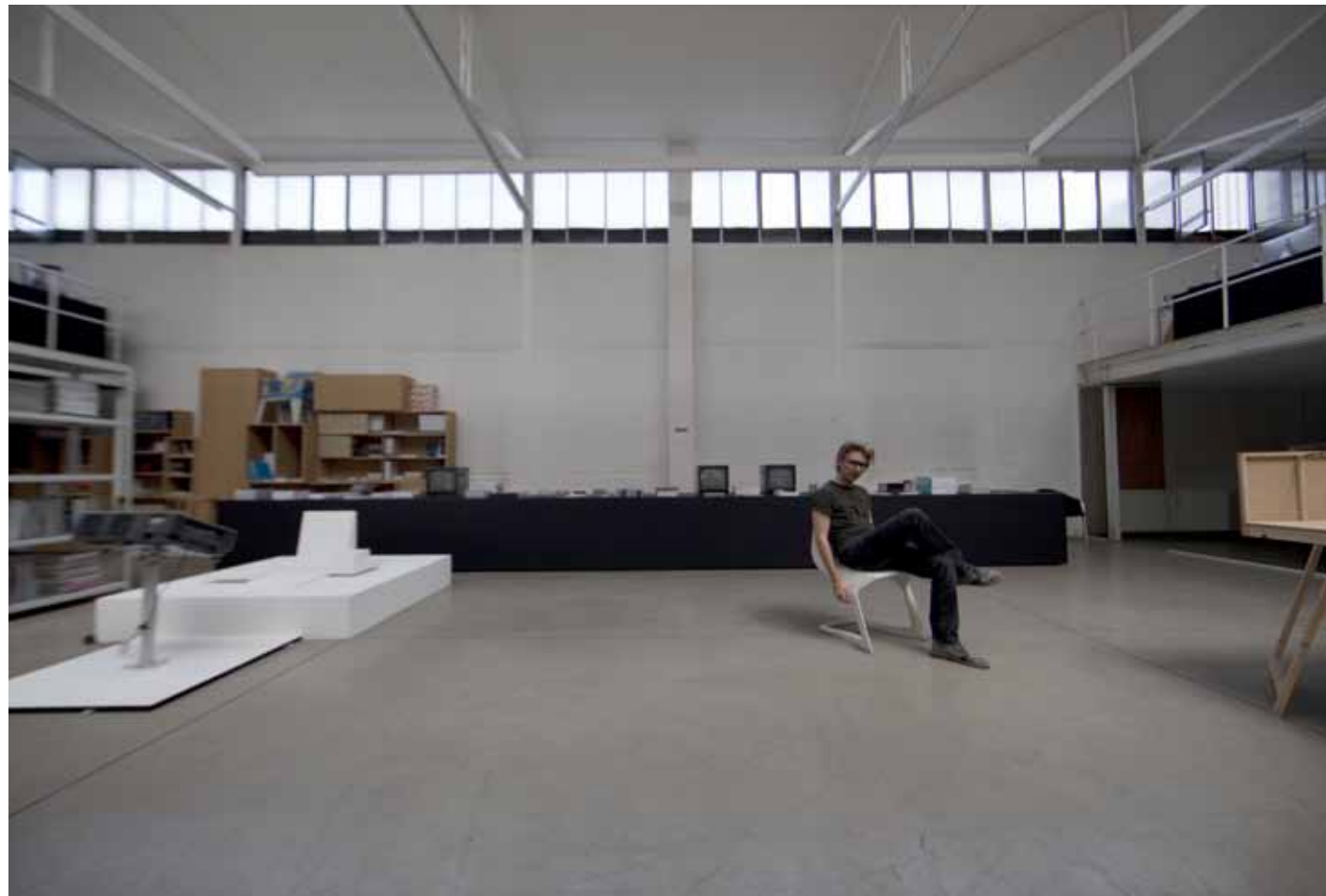
MY OWN PRIVATE BAUHAUS:

THE
MIKE MEIRÉ
FACTORY

BY
KATYA TYLEVICH

PHOTOGRAPHS
BY
ALEXEI TYLEVICH





TO MEET MIKE MEIRÉ, I board the earliest flight from Berlin to Cologne and take a train into the city center. Before hailing a cab to Meiré's 'Factory' in the Cologne-Ehrenfeld district, I briefly loiter outside the famous Cologne Cathedral, where I have my non-denominational Hallelujah moment compromised by a street performer doing *The Robot* while dressed as a Saint. Since it's too early in the morning for other tourists to eclipse me, I'm treated to a private showing. Um. Bravo.

Hours later, to meet the last train from Cologne to Berlin, I rush from Meiré's studio to the Hauptbahnhof (central station), where I find my train has been cancelled. The only alternative includes multiple stops and a broken air-conditioner, but again, it's the *only* alternative. I sit down. The man who sits across from me is as delighted as he is sweaty (and

we're all very sweaty on this train ride). He tells me: 'They say the direct train was cancelled because there have been eight suicide attempts on the rails today!' All smiles, he gets off at the next stop.

So, what's that Mike Meiré says about 'the flow of life' and the 'the sun rise, and the sun set'? What would he make of the bookends that bracket my visit to his Factory? Doubtless, Meiré would add them to his cornucopia of inspirations, among which he lists: seeing one's reflection in the bathroom mirror and thinking 'God, I've aged,' reading the obituaries, meditating, struggling, listening to music, and contemplating Michael Jackson and Madonna, but not Lady Gaga ('I don't believe in Lady Gaga,' Meiré tells me.)

I spend roughly five hours at Meiré's studio(s), and I would probably spend five more, were it not for my train to catch.

Meiré is just offering to order some sushi when I have the good sense to check the time. I mean, this place is like a restorative spa retreat for the brain's right hemisphere (more on brain fitness later). Around a private outdoor courtyard, Meiré's Factory includes a designated architecture atelier, a fine arts workshop, and an airy central loft that plays host to installations, people, and events; it's also where the art direction and magazine design happens.

'This is my Bauhaus,' Meiré tells me, leading me through the different corners of his Factory. 'Sometimes, with sixty people here, it can feel like a campus. You walk by and everybody's working on a very different project, from magazines to architecture.' To christen the space in 2004, The Factory became a stage for an eleven-day performance called *The*

Below:
Kid's Wear
Cover and spreads vol.31
Autumn/Winter
2010/2011

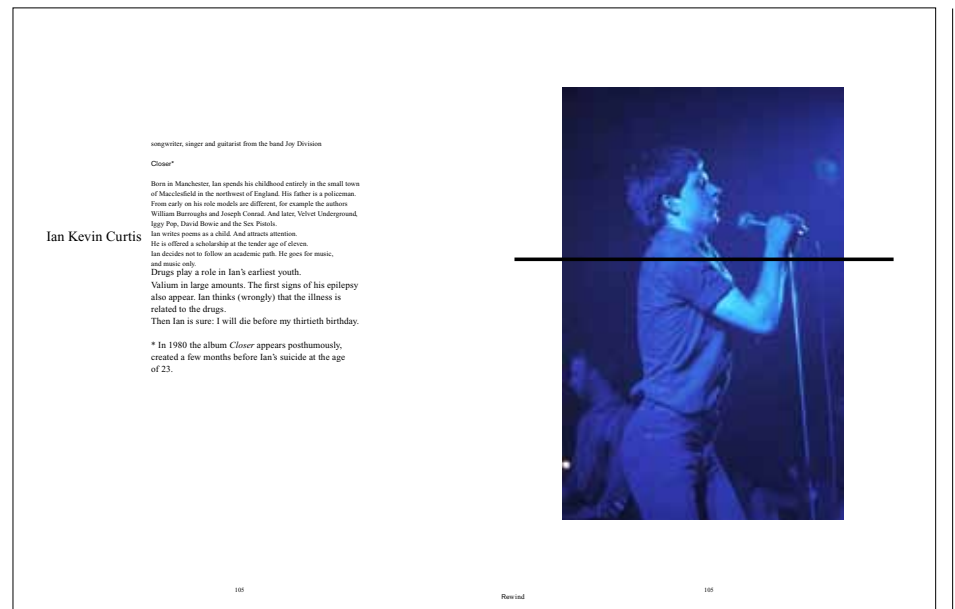


Stardust Festival, starring photographer and musician Mark Borthwick. Meiré reflects on the event with the cadence and excitement of someone saying, it was "the best house-warming ever".

Officially, Meiré divides his lack of time between 'Brand Coding,' 'Art Direction,' 'Architecture,' and 'Culture Projects.' But into the second hour of our conversation, Meiré tells me: 'I used to find it embarrassing when people asked, "What are you doing?" or "What is your profession?" This was always my struggle.'

Why 'struggle?'

'Because I like to do logos and I love making magazines and sometimes I'm not afraid to do architecture, a house, whatever. These days, it's somehow easier for me to talk about this: I am what you like; call me what I should be for you. But when I was twenty-one, twenty-two,





Below:
Apart
Cover for issue 1
1983

Opposite:
032c
Cover and spreads
2007-2010



Meiré showing me iPhone photos of his three sons; or Meiré pausing in front of a table or computer screen, doing a mental close-up of the so many magazines he's involved with. Nevertheless, no matter how many different subjects we hit, Meiré fully commits to each one, even if we only spend minutes or seconds on it. Lively and always at attention, he's like human Ritalin, or something.

Let's try to scratch the surface of your professional biography.

Growing up in a little village outside Cologne, you couldn't really get cool magazines. It wasn't like growing up in London, where your chances of seeing something big were pretty high. Where I grew up, we were 'abroad' from everything.

But I started listening to different music, and as a seventeen-year-old kid,

I discovered Bauhaus. That's how it all started, really. I had a very early passion for the movement, and for the *idea* of a movement. I was so attracted to the fact that some people decided to create their own culture, their own fashion, architecture, music, theatre, dance performances. As a teenager, I thought: how amazing to be able to do your own work and imagine your own culture.

Later, in 1983, my brother and I started our own magazine called *Apart*. It was a different time, we didn't even have computers, but everything that's happened since, connects to that magazine. People liked our layout very much, and we were asked to do some branding, to do some image campaigns. I never said 'no' — I mean, why would I? Everything was so fresh, so new to me. At the same time,

it felt very natural. And through that, I was introduced to several people who ran companies.

I think in the eighties, when we first discovered design, the strategy was to show that you're *different*. These days, everybody says 'We belong to a community, let's come together,' but when we started, we had to make certain we were the *coolest*, that we were a bit different, that *we* made the discoveries. Of course, with that, you had to wear funny clothes and have weird haircuts. We were eighties kids. I think that's when I met Peter Saville (we had our *The Apartment* project together for three years) and he told me: 'Mike, I think you are one of these people who can read or decode cultural language, nonverbal language; what music people are listening to, what they're wearing.'

In the long run, every project I do is about living, about the flow of life, the riches of the family, where the sun sets, where the sun rises, the climate, the periphery of a building



And can you?

Well, I have always been — I don't want to say naïve, but I really do believe that people are good, you know? I believe in spirituality. For eleven years, I did meditation and discovered all the books of Krishnamurti. That actually helped me a lot when I began to invent the architecture for the Dornbracht bathrooms. In the beginning, the bathroom was seen as a boring place, but I started a project called *Statements*, and invited artists to discuss the bathroom in different ways; as a place where you're actually naked, where you see yourself ageing, maybe you have sex in the bathroom, all these kind of things that were maybe thought of as radical at the time, but had beautiful results. In that way, I have always been interested in the cultural context: that space where



products appear, and how people relate to their appearance. In the end, it's not about money. I know that's something everybody says, but, in the end, I do think the quality and ability you bring into a project is what generates success, which is sometimes financial, and other times more successful in terms of cultural relevance.

Even a commercial project doesn't have to look too commercial, you know? It can have a little anarchy. Or magazines — oh my God, they wanted to kill me in the press because I stretched some typography, or something. In the long run, every project I do is about living, about the flow of life, the riches of the family, where the sun sets, where the sun rises, the climate, the periphery of a building. When you work on a magazine, you ask: 'Why do we need another magazine? Why this one?'

You observe life and the people you meet. When I start my designs, I try to create a story for myself.

What kind of story?

For example, I worked on the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, the oldest newspaper in the world. They called it 'The Old Aunt,' and it *looked* like an old aunt. So the story for me involved taking this Old Aunt and putting her in some Chanel. Nothing too crazy, I don't want to color her hair or anything, but I want her to have a hint, a look, a personality. I need to create personalities for my projects because, quite often, I'm working on, say, fifteen, twenty very different projects at a time, and each project needs its own kind of intellectual discussion. I have to make very quick decisions and concentrate. Sometimes a certain sound or music will bring me

Below:
Brandeins
Covers
1999-2010

back to the emotion I have for a specific project, remind me of the story, the metaphor. We all have certain songs, or certain stories that remind us of our first kiss, or our first dance. Well, I have certain songs and certain stories that remind me of certain projects. Especially for working on magazines, because say, *o32c* and *Kids Wear* — each one requires very, very different emotions. I'm conditioned this way. I always have to find an anchor to pull me quickly into whatever project I have to work on, *now*.

And does it always work?

No. It's a game. It's fun. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, but I have to say I'm very disciplined and I find ways to give the best of my abilities to each project. If I have only an hour and a half, I want to bring everything that I have at that moment to that hour and a half. It's good training for being efficient, which is one of those 'oh no' words these days. But — discipline, efficiency, success, time — you know, when you have three kids, a big family, everybody wants a bit of you and you have to find some way to deal with it. So, I think you have to be happy and love what you do; otherwise you go mad.

Do you love everything that you do?

Yeah. I have to say that I do. And I try to avoid projects where I don't like the people involved. But it's only five years ago that I began to learn how to say 'no' to projects. It's not easy. I'm getting more and more offers now. I'm getting so many requests for interviews, and so many questions from students. Which is all very, very nice, and I don't mind; through those questions, I learn a lot about myself. But it's time consuming. I get a lot of offers to become a professor or something like this. And I simply don't have the time. I just started making my art, and I try to balance my business, and my jobs here. I do try to bring up people that can take care of the company a bit more, so that I can have more free time for my art. So, Saturday I'm the artist. Sunday I'm the family father. Monday to Friday, I'm the businessman. I can't relax. I'm too curious about what comes next to relax. But I will easily live to be a hundred or a hundred and ten years old. That means I'm

just leaving puberty now. So I have time. I can be a professor in twenty years.

Did you always know this or did this just come to you?

No, I know this, I know this. In the long run, you shouldn't follow the media too much. Don't believe what your friends are saying. Life is really a decision. I tell you, in the nineties, when I did eleven years of meditation and got a kind of teacher, a coach or guru: I really got into this kind of, 'mind design.' I was *seduced* by it. You can go to the gym and train certain muscles, right? So you can also train or uncondition your mind, and that's very important. Otherwise, you become a shadow of yourself.

How does that translate into your work?

Do you have a signature style?

I don't want to have a visual signature for myself, but over time, people have come to identify certain approaches I have. Still, I believe more in the identity or the mental attitude of a project. A designer has to listen and feel for the desires of those who run the project. Then you have to make those desires visible. This, I think, is my main job. It is not to show what I think the new funky type is right now, which is actually what most people do. I think differently and maybe my concepts, in the long run, are somehow bolder because they are actually simpler.

I created a liquid identity for myself: flow with life, read the project. Without regulations, the world becomes so much more. But people — especially in Germany — people are afraid. They need to control because, in the end, it's all about power. Power's a very evil thing. The design becomes ugly because of it. When you have people sitting around a table, there's always, at minimum, one asshole among them, giving bad energy to everybody. It's important to kill that bad energy. It's a mind game. It's all manipulation.

Everything about design that I don't like is so sober, so clean, so aseptic. Life is not like that. I think, in our day, we are faced with too much information. We have to digest a lot. While, at the same time, sensually, we are not seduced often enough because everything is just an 'intellectual product', you know. I always

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Below:
ARCH+
Cover and spreads
2008-2010



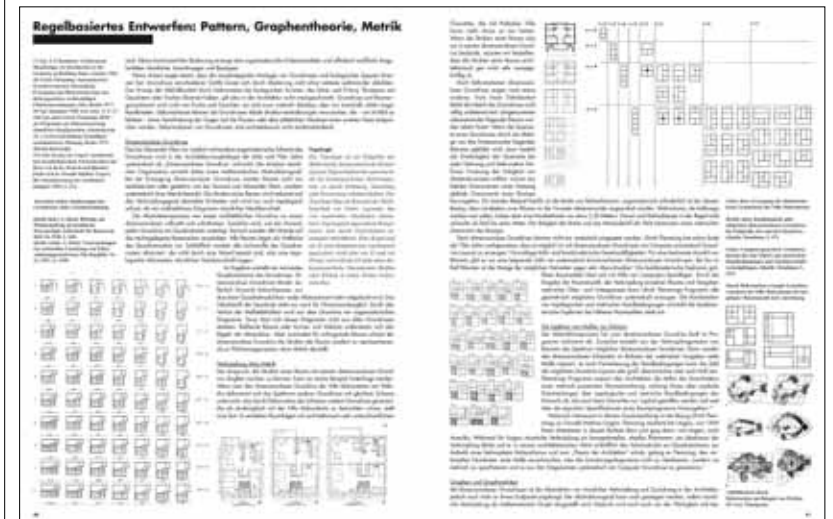
try to bring in life. Mistakes. I don't make anything too beautiful because too beautiful is very dictatorial. You've just limited yourself.

What kind of seduction are you talking about?

I'm Mr. Eighties. I had to bring in all the beauty into my life, I had to fight for design. Nowadays, kids grow up in an already-designed world. So I think to myself: What's the next step? I think about sustainability, for example. Can we make healthy design? Again, it's like Krishnamurti said, 'You are the world'; you are the one who makes a difference. It's a long way to go, of course.

Is there a reason you choose to be based in Cologne?

I moved to Cologne when I was twenty-one, and we had a really wonderful art world here in the eighties. Cologne was really big, then. Now, everybody talks about Berlin, of course. I also wanted to go to Berlin in 2000 — that would have been a good time — but we had another company in Frankfurt, as well, and decided not to move. A lot of the cultural projects going on in Berlin are thanks to ex-Cologne-ists. Cologne had a really great foundation, and it's sad that a lot of people moved away. It's funny, right now we do two really interesting magazines: *ARCH+* and *o32c*. We do them here in Cologne, but officially, they're from Berlin. A cool Berlin thing, done right here. We send the PDFs over.



No, I tell you, I have a struggle with Berlin. I have a love and hate affair with it. I hate it because it took away really nice people from Cologne, but I love it because it has a big history, it has a fantastic size, an incredible culture program, and because I wish I would be there more often. But subjectively, I have to say I can't work there. Whenever you're in Berlin, you always talk and talk and talk and talk and meet and talk and go to a party and this opening and that opening and have a big headache. I come back after three days, exhausted. Maybe that would change if I moved there, but somehow in my position, I have much more freedom here in my Factory because — I

don't know — I don't have to meet people. It's not that I don't like people, it's just I don't like time wasted. I like to focus. I love working.

And I have such wonderful people here. I love sitting here, going over projects. I love going home and having fantastic food. I love playing with the kids. It's my little city.

Then again, I really don't want to die here in Cologne, that's for sure. This is just a period in my biography. Maybe the death period will be Majorca, because that is really where the soul belongs. It's so peaceful there. I mean, in the end, I don't want to die anyway, but who does? ●