Interview with Empty Kingdom, 20.01.2013

1. Hi Philipp, before we begin, I´d just like to thank you for spending the time to do this interview. Means a lot to both me and the Empty Kingdom team. Alright, let´s get this ball rolling shall we? First and foremost, give us a bit of an introduction about yourself.

Hi Raymond and thanks for the interview – the pleasure is mine.
I grew up in Bremen, a city in northern Germany. I then moved to Nantes in France to study art and experimental film at the *École des Beaux Arts*. After graduation I spent some time in Portugal with a cat to study autodidactically character animation and its relation to sound and music. Recently I finished my postgraduate studies at the *Academy of Media Arts* in Cologne/Germany, where I developed an interest in site-specific installations combined with experimental animation.

2. Seeing as how you handle most of the workload for each project you initiate, how did you come about acquiring this intense skill set? Was there a lot of schooling involved? Relentless experimentation? Both? Looking back, which was more beneficial to you?

In the two art schools I studied at the education was focused on discussing concepts and ideas rather than on teaching specific techniques, while simultaneously leaving the students a lot of freedom to experiment on their own. In that sense, I cannot draw a clear line between schooling and experimentation, since even as a student I worked in a very autodidactic way. The reason why I'm dealing with many different production fields is probably my curiosity to explore new paths when I'm working on a project. It can be a technique or a topic I'm not familiar with – but I somehow need a sense of discovery to keep me excited throughout the project. This character trait makes me get to know various different paths and sometimes allows me to draw unusual connections between them.

3. I feel that your work resonates a very inquisitive art-science relationship. Is that a major component to what inspires you? Do your artistic concepts take shape when observing their logical / mathematical origins? If I´m completely off base here, what have you found to be a good source of inspiration?

My approach to character animation is driven by a strong need to really understand what I'm doing. I studied most books available on the topic and was a bit frustrated, since they would usually just tell you how to make things look good, without really explaining the physical principles behind it. So I started to study the laws of motion, which was a bit of a hassle, since at high school I was extremely bad in physics and not particularly interested in mathematics. But it was worth the effort, as this research gave me a basis to build on – which is independent from a distinct animation style like Disney or whatever – and it also made me more aware of the relationship between sound and movement.
All this might sound quite technical, but ironically it' s all about gaining freedom: I think that when you really understand something on an analytical level, it will, at some point, become unconscious and allow you to use it in an intuitive way. Similar to learning a foreign language: in the beginning you will need to learn the grammar consciously, and at some point you just talk without thinking about it.
Most of my recent animation works are more or less influenced by this study on animation-physics and some projects might therefore feel "scientific". On the other hand, I tend to leave a lot of space to irrational or chaotic elements that cannot be justified in any way whatsoever. So it' s the balance between both poles that tends to create a friction that I find inspiring.

4. How did the idea for your sculptural installation SNAIL TRAIL (2012) come about? I can only assume that a whole lot of experimentation went into this project before any fruitful results came about, but could you give us a brief walkthrough of how this particular piece went from idea to reality. Do you usually follow the same workflow for all of your projects, or does each new artwork require a completely revamped approach?

The character of the snail came into being one day when I was drawing around in my sketch book. I then animated the snail in about three days, which was a very intuitive and spontaneous process during which I didn't think about anything in particular and just concentrated on what the character was doing. However, in the previous months, I had done a lot of research into the evolution of life, locomotion and acceleration in contemporary society, so there was a network of associations brewing around in my head for some time and *Snail Trail* suddenly emerged as a fruit of this process.

When the basic animation was done, the resulting loop inspired me to project it with a laser around 360° onto a cylinder, so that the audience would have to walk around to follow the snail. The problem was that I didn't have a clue how to do this and therefore had to experiment with various projection techniques, which then led to the discovery of the phosphorescent light trails. When the installation was finished, I started to work on the short film version, which again developed its own life and ended up being quite different from what I had originally in mind.
Even though I don't have a particular workflow for my projects, I tend to give room to the development of an idea and then look for a moment in which creation flows spontaneously. It almost feels as if the figures I'm animating developed their own life and then guided me through the process. This might sound a bit strange, but after all "to animate" means ‘to give life to sth.’ – so in a way this approach seems to make sense.

5. How do you balance the procedural elements of animation, sound design, and sculptural composition of any new project? Let’s take BREAKTHROUGH (2011) as an example. Does one component receive higher priority than the others, or are all production engines running simultaneously? What is your thought process behind juggling these varying elements?

Break|through was originally created as a commissioned piece for a festival in the context of the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. So the starting point was basically to create a piece about a wall. In search for inspiration, I walked around in Berlin on a flea-market where I found a huge plush spider. A bit further down the road I discovered an abandoned house with plasterboard walls that broke away easily. I kind of felt that the spider wanted to destroy the wall, which seemed to be a suitable action for a short film about the Berlin Wall. However, the true breakthrough for the concept came up with the idea of turning the animation into an installation in which two destructive spiders are projected simultaneously onto the two opposite sides of a wall. This means that it is not just an animation *about* a spider destroying a wall – it *is* a wall itself. This conceptual framework makes the viewers experience the characteristic trait of The Wall – namely separation – as they can at any time *see* only one side. However, the characteristic trait of The Fall – namely union – is experienced simultaneously as the audience can at any time *hear* both sides.

So a lot of the "meaning" of *Break|through* is generated just by the way the animation is presented, and this kind of creative dimension is for me the reason why installative works are so fascinating to deal with.
Once this concept was developed I animated the spider in about three weeks, which was a very improvised and destructive process. The sound design took me almost three months, since there were so many different sounds to record and libraries to comb through. And to build the final presentation on a revolving stage (see trailer) took another week or so.
Even though the amount of time for the animation, the sound design and the sculptural composition seems to be unbalanced in this project, I wouldn't say that any component gets a higher priority than another. I just keep working on each part until it' s entirely accurate and spend the time I need to get to that point.

6. What type of software / hardware do you utilize in order to project, edit, program, and animate your varying works? With respect to your installations SNAIL TRAIL (2012) and NOTEBOOK PHASE (2011), how do you go about translating those live pieces into video? Do you feel that this transition from one medium to another positively or negatively alters the experience / full meaning of what you are trying to convey to your audience?

I usually animate with 3ds max and do the post production in After Effects. *Snail Trail* involved stop motion which was done with *Dragon Frame* as well as some laser projection freeware.
As mentioned above, I'm very interested in how the installative setup in space influences the "feeling" or the "message" of my animations. *Snail Trail*, for example, is an animation about cycles and locomotion and because of the cylindrical setup of the installation, the audience has to move around in circles themselves to follow the snail – so it' s an animation that "animates" the audience. Again, the setup itself is part of the "meaning" of the work, which is something you cannot deal with in a cinematic projection of a film, where you always have a beginning and an end, and of course the public sits still. So if I "translate" these installative pieces into video it naturally loses a part of the work, but on the other hand it can also gain by the specific characteristics of a film. In the film version of *Snail Trail*, for example, the animation is seen through the eyes of a flying camera which is an exclusivly cinematic feature, and I also worked with the laser aesthetics in ways that would be impossible in a live piece. So it's important for me that the film is a work on its own, and if I

feel that an animation does not work in a specific medium I don't force it. That is why *Break/through*, for example, does not exist as a short film.

In *Notebook Phase* the animation is projected on a notebook sculpture, the keyboard of which is replaced by a vibrating water-bowl. Again, this setup and the experience of watching a real water reflection cannot be reproduced in a cinema, but the short film version has its own spicy contrasting graphic style, which does not compete with the installation.

7. In reference to your piece NOTEBOOK PHASE (2011), what about the audiovisual concept has you so fascinated? From your perspective, what importance does such a topic have in the art world / real world?

Notebook Phase is the fruit of a research into the interplay of sound waves and character animation. Sound is movement and in *Notebook Phase* I'm using this movement to animate both, the figure and the water surface. The compositional structure was inspired by *minimal music* and its complex musical patterns, which yet derive from simple repetitive motifs. In *Notebook Phase* these construction principles are translated into animation.
The figure was inspired by a trip to Tokyo. In a technical and noisy quarter of the city I saw a neon-symbol of a notebook which looked like a figure. I had the idea to animate it, but a conventional animation technique did not seem to fit, as I wanted to portrait a computerized character directly through the quality of motion. Therefore, I developed an animation technique which uses binary signals to generate movement. Even when the audience is not conscious of these underlying principles, one feels the mathematical aura of the work, which, however, is broken up in the end.
The work is ambiguous and leaves consciously space for the interpretation of each viewer. Some see it as a bizarre tribute or an ironic critique of the cybersociety, others see it as a timeless reflection on complementary forces, others again see it as an essentially abstract audiovisual experience without any meaning at all. Every perspective is valid.

8. With so much emphasis placed on the structural, audiovisual, and animated integrity of your pieces, I am very curious to know who have been the biggest artistic influences in your life (name a max of three). What particular

enlightening contribution has each of these role models bestowed upon you and your work?

This is a very difficult question, since I'm taking inspiration from many different fields – it would almost be easier for me to give you 300 names then 3. But well, I'll give it a try ;)
1. Paul Klee is part of a generation of artists whose drawings I love – (including Picasso, Schiele, Giacometti...). His characters are often placed between the figurative and the abstract and there is a playful naivety combined with a timeless grace which I like very much. He also explored a lot the relationship between music and images and kind of built his own conceptual system. Yet, his work never feels purely scientific and there is always a feeling of liveliness and intuition, which I find inspiring.
2. Miles Davis' music and the concept of Cool Jazz had a great influence on my way to think about animation. Cool Jazz is very much about simplicity and the flow of melodic lines. It emerged in the 40s as a reaction to the hectic Bepop style which concentrated more on fast chord progressions. I think that a lot of 3d character animation nowadays can be compared to Bepop, as animators tend to concentrate a lot on quickly changing character poses which lead to a more "vertical" thinking about time. Cool Jazz taught me the beauty of simplicity and when I animate I often use as few keyframes as possible, which makes me concentrate more on the horizontal flow.
3. Finally a contemporary artist: Wolfgang Tillmanns. His photographic work has a unique sense of poetry and combines heterogeneous themes: abstract forms, human portraits, political observations, natural phenomena, etc. I like how these contrasting impressions are combined and reassembled in his exhibitions and books to a network of associations which together form a greater whole than the individual images by themselves. I also feel that his photographic view is somehow honest – it's an art that does not try to impress the viewer – which, to my mind, is always a feature of true beauty.

9. Those were some heavy questions, let's lighten the load with an off-tangent topic. What was the coolest or scariest dream you can remember? Maybe even a dream that brought some inkling of inspiration?

It might sound like a cliché, but I dream quite often about water waves that appear somewhere – often at strange places that are quite far away from the sea. Usually they are just there for no reason, and everybody else in my dream

does not really care about them. Often they are huge and dangerous – so maybe it’ s about overcoming fears or so. I guess I have to ask a psychologist about the meaning... Anyway, water and waves definitely inspire my artwork and I like to be close to the sea. I also love surfing and the feeling you get with free flowing motion – which is something my animations are about as well.

10. As we now reach the end of our interview, I’ d just like to give a big thanks again to your efforts, patience, and consideration. But before we end this session, are there any future / potential projects in the works that you’ d like to share with us?

In the last months I’ ve been touring around a lot for exhibitions and festivals, just living the present and didn't think too much about future projects. I have several ideas – moving to Berlin, looking for collaborations, etc. But I'll see... One project I definitely want to finish soon is an animation entitled *Ensō*. I've been working on it for more than 5 years now, and all the projects we've been discussing here are partly inspired by my research for *Ensō*. I will let you know when there is new stuff ;)
Thanks for the interview – and cheers.