MAX HATTLER IS IN THE ROOM

IN CONVERSATION WITH
MAX HATTLER Q&A

MAX HATTLER HAS LONG BEEN IN MIAF'S SIGHTS AS A potential guest. His work is joyously indefinable and his career to date suggests an artist who sees many different canvases on which a piece of animation may be projected. We have been screening his films for years but it wasn't until a chance meeting and a dinner in London a few years ago that it became clear he could talk the talk as well as walk the walk. That tyranny of distance was overcome (to some degree) when Max took up an academic role in Hong Kong, although in truth Max is one of the most travelled animators alive. We sat him down for a few moments just before he headed off to the Zagreb Animation Festival's conference, "Animafest Scanner II", for a chat.

The simple stuff first. What's the short version of your history as an artist? Was there anything else you ever thought you might want to do?

First I wanted to become a gemstone collector, pirate and astronaut, to chart unknown territory and unearth unimaginable treasures. Then I set my eyes on just slightly more real-world professions such as visual artist, designer or musician, and tried my hand at all of them to some degree. I could never decide which of these paths to fully pursue though, so I ended up combining them into what I do today.

Do you think of yourself as an animator? A filmmaker? Video artist? All of these?

All of the above, and you could add some more: director, artist filmmaker, audiovisual artist, performance artist, sounding visual artist, visualist, experimental filmmaker, visual musician, digital artist, moving image artist, and new media artist. Each definition comes with certain advantages and disadvantages, specific assumptions that might or might not apply fully to my work.

Was there a particular film or moment when you definitely realised "yep, this is what I do"?

Seeing a showcase of British music video directing collective Shynola in Berlin in 2002 convinced me to apply to the MA in Animation programme at the Royal College of Art. At the time I was working as a compositor, and was dying to make my own films again. Then, once at the RCA, it was a constant diet of 20th century experimental film introduced by the late AL Rees that exposed me to a rich history I had previously been oblivious to, which resonated with my own nascent practice. An Oskar Fischinger screening at the nearby Goethe Institut finally brought the message home. By the time I graduated in 2005, I had more or less started to figure out where I stand and what I do.

How would you characterise your relationship with the various technologies of filmmaking?

I'm most comfortable with the idea of animation as a frame-by-frame approach to orchestrating time and movement. Guided by this principle, I work with different techniques and technologies, usually depending on conceptual and budgetary constraints, level of adventurousness and so on.

To the outside, you seem to have gone through stylistic "phases". It's an easy – and therefore probably lazy – observation to make but is it true?

In true (astro)nautical tradition, I like to move on and explore new territories. Some of my films stand fairly alone, stylistically. Examples would have to be *Everything Turns* (2004), *Drift* (2007), or *Your Highness* (2010). But the gemstone collector in me makes me revisit past lodes that still carry potential: Compare the similarities between installation loops *Heaven and Hell* (2010) and *–Ol* (2015), kaleidoscopic flag pieces *Collision* (2005) and *Stop the Show* (2013), photography-based moving canvases *Striper v0.1* (2006) and *All Rot* (2015), or my mirror stop-motion works *AANAATT* (2008), *Model Starship* (2012) and *Unclear Proof* (2013). And then there are obviously all sorts of connections and cross-references between the different works of varying techniques and release dates.

How do you feel about "cinema" in the literal sense of the word – ie, people sitting in quiet, orderly rows in a darkened room looking at the same large projected image? Perhaps following on from that – do you think your works have a "natural" or "optimal" screening environment that suits them best?

Cinematic screening in a way creates the best reception conditions in that it is direct (large scale and loud), distraction free (switch off your mobile phones) and durational (please don't leave the theatre during the screening). However, the filmmaker usually has little influence over the other films shown in the same program, or on the quality of the projection. Exhibition presentation allows for better control of the display conditions, and creates potentially more personal, more refined relationships between the viewer and the artwork. It is also infinitely more suitable for loop-based and multi-screen pieces. On the other hand, this scenario makes it all but impossible to manage how much of the work, both temporally and spatially, the viewer will choose to engage with. I've been trying to have it both ways a lot of the time, as I see advantages and disadvantages on either side, and my work can easily cross over between the two modes of presentation. So I might show one version in a festival and another as part of an exhibition.

While not an ideal viewing environment by any means, I also put much of my work online: www.maxhattler.com / www.vimeo.com/maxhattler / www.youtube.com/maxhattler

How much do you factor in the audience's experience and anticipated reaction during the creative phase of making a new work?

To gauge effectiveness, I sometimes show work in progress to trusted friends and collaborators. Otherwise, I tend to rely solely on my own poor judgement.

Your latest film "All Rot" is another change of style with a "cameraless animation" look and feel to it with stylistic nods to McLaren, Lye, Woloshen, Reeves etc. Where did this film come from?

Using photography as the basis of All Rot (2015), my aim was reintroduce tactile qualities, grit, texture and physical marks, as opposed to the completely virtual, digital abstraction of works such as *X* (2012) or *A Very Large Increase in the Size, Amount, or Importance of Something Over a Very Short Period of Time* (2013). I started working on *All Rot* during an artist residency at ArToll Kunstlabor in Germany, which is set within parkland inhabited by a series of mental health institutions, most of them high security prisons. I took the abandoned mini golf course outside the residency building as my source material. Crazy golf seemed strangely appropriate to the location. After photographing the decaying golf course tracks in close-up, I proceeded to digitally re-animate the photographs, enhancing the texture and worn paint marks through inverting and levelling the colour channels of the image. This gives *All Rot* the filmic and painterly qualities of cameraless animation. The construction process however is completely digital. The work went through a progression from a more representational to an increasingly abstract engagement with the place, foregrounding formal qualities of shape, colour and movement. Having tried revealing some of the surrounding site in early experiments, I found that this lessened the effect of the abstraction, and made the work about a juxtaposition with the real. My interest however was in the transcendence of the site through non-objectivism. While the work remains 'physical' (through the marks and textures) it also becomes 'metaphysical' (through unbroken abstraction). A reference to the place remains in the title: *All Rot* is an anagram of ArToll, the locus of the residency. It is also an allusion to decay: to the decaying abandoned mini golf course, to mental decay and the inevitability of death (we all rot eventually) which one is confronted with at ArToll on a daily basis. On another level though, when understood in German, the title refers to the film's qualities of abstract shape and colour which conjure up associations of planetary movements, implying a transcendence of the earthly plane: the direct translation of *All Rot* is *Outer Space Red*. In a strangely coincidental way, the title *All Rot*, when understood as *All Rotate*, also links to my RCA student film Everything Turns (2004)—a semi-figurative drawn animation inspired by Durs Grünbein's poem Vertigo—which emblematizes the futility and brevity of human life, while hinting, when presented as a loop, at the possibility of rebirth.

1923 aka Heaven
Max Hattler Denmark/UK/Germany, 2'00, 2010

The first of two complimentary/opposositional works created during a 5 day workshop with student animators and CG artists in Denmark inpsired by French outsider artist Augustin Lesage.

Shift
Max Hattler UK/Germany, 3'00, 2012

A combining of sci-fi themes through abstract object animation using the New Age idea of 'dimensional shift' to visualise higher dimensions and unearthliness.

Sync
### Max Hattler Denmark/Holland/UK/Germany, 9'00, 2010

Based on the idea that there is an underlying unchanging s ynchronisation at the centre of everything; a Sync that was decided at the very beginning of time.

AANAATT
Max Hattler UK/Germany/Japan, 4'45, 2008

The ever-shifting shape of Analogue Futurism.
100% digital-effects free.

Collision
Max Hattler UK/Germany, 2'30, 2005

Islamic patterns and American quilts and the colours and geometry of flags as an abstract field of reflection.
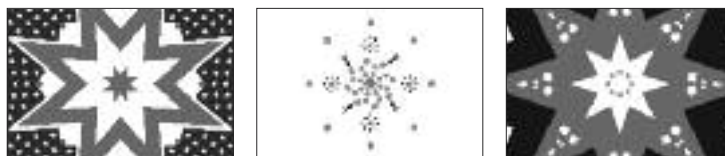
Drift
Max Hattler UK/Germany, 3'33, 2007

A blue planet and some 'air!

Spin
Max Hattler France/UK/Germany, 3'55, 2010

Toy soldiers marching and moving in harmony, spinning and rotating, erupting and exploding. When conflict becomes a spectacle, the lines between destruction and entertainment get blurred.

Model Starship
### Max Hattler UK/Germany, 0'45, 2012

A very brief encounter with the world of the stars.

X
Max Hattler UK/Germany, 6'00, 2012

In a kinetic energetic otherworld where everything is by itself yet can intersect with each other, cross-action seems the best way to solve an unknown.

All Rot
Max Hattler UK/Germany/Hong Kong, 4'00, 2015

An experiment in synaesthetic cinema, rendering an otherwise mundane environment into a rapturous and abstract interweaving of textures and colour.
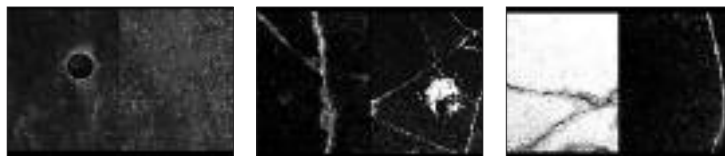
1925 aka Hell
Max Hattler Denmark/UK/Germany, 2'00, 2010

The second of the two loops inspired by Augustin Lesage, this one drawing from Lesage's 1925 painting 'A Symbolic Composition Of The Spiritual World'.