Meg Miller

The websites designed by *Christoph Knoth* and *Konrad Renner*, Professors for Digital Graphic at the HFBK Hamburg, spin[1], smoke[2], and bloom[3]. They float[4] and flame[5], replicate, then disappear

They're the websites of artist groups, publishers, and festivals in Berlin and in Germany, and many lately have been for larger institutions, more established but still experimental. And they're for publications—print magazines that want to find the best way to translate their content to an online context, or digital publications interested in new ways of presenting content online. Sometimes the websites themselves feel like fictions being published on the web, like the recent Cryptorave site, which mines cryptocurrency in order to produce a digital entry ticket and a fictitious identity for an IRL rave. Always, they feel like their own little worlds.

Which is to say that the websites made by Christoph Knoth and Konrad Renner are custom, made by hand. They're not designed to recede quietly in the background, but to reveal the mechanisms at work behind our digital interfaces, and to go beyond the surface of a client's identity or a publication's work. As Renner puts it: "Sometimes calculated dysfunctionality and interruptions are better translations of the content than a streamlined interface." At a time when design templates like Squarespace and platforms like Facebook and Instagram are making so much of what's published online look the same, Knoth & Renner's approach creates websites that break through the glossy uniformity with some complexity, expressiveness, and criticality.

One of the ways they do this is by acknowledging the messy realities of their chosen medium: technology changes, websites break, and digital projects aren't preserved forever. Recently, the studio has been embracing this constant state of flux online by designing a single website that has several different temporary versions, in which the design changes completely with each new iteration. In the spirit of examining the durational quality of publishing online—and in step with how the studio works virtually with clients—we've conducted this interview over Google Docs, Skype, and by email, sending links, adding thoughts, and continuing the conversation.

Meg Miller: I like that you guys met by the color printer while studying at Burg Giebichenstein University of Art and Design Halle—a very analog chance encounter for what would become a digital design studio. When did you start Knoth & Renner[6] together, and why?

Konrad Renner: That was around 2010/11. We were really just finishing our studies and discussing what we wanted to do next. We both had some small jobs lined up, so we decided to merge them and work together. Christoph Knoth: We were still of the mindset that we'd design books and posters, which was the type of graphic design that we were doing for our studies. No one was really offering digital courses in graphic design. In the beginning, we thought of web design as something you did as a part of graphic design, not something you could make your entire career, or do on a daily basis. But at the same time, it was a time when everyone

thought that they needed a website. So we just figured it out as we went along.

MM: What was the first website you made together? CK: I would say Stefanie Leinhos's website[7], which is still online. Stefanie is an artist and a good friend—she gave us complete freedom, even though she had no idea what we could do.

MM: You label yourselves as a "virtual studio." That has a nice duality, describing not only the work that you produce, but also the way you tend to work. Do you do all of your collaborating over the internet? KR: I don't even remember my last physical meeting with a client.

CK: Most of the time, we talk to clients over Skype, and we do a screenshare of the website in progress. I have the feeling that I'm somehow closer to these people than I would be if I were sitting next to them and showing them the website on my laptop. It doesn't feel natural to show somebody a website like that, when you're just scrolling through it for them. That's not the way we interact with websites.

KR: We usually collaborate with each other by email and via long, well-prepared Google docs that contain lists of things to do, things that already happened, and ongoing notes. Essentially in the same way that we are conducting this interview.

MM: I wanted to talk to you guys about your approach to web design. I liked what you wrote to me earlier—that, according to the golden rules of "good" interface design, the internet should be a medium that you can't feel, that functions automatically in the background as a service for its users … "Our approach toward the design and development of a website tries to deal with these rules in a critical way. We believe that it's way more interesting to investigate the immanent visual and technical gestures that a new project automatically presents. And we then try to make these things visible. We try to let them speak, or force users to interact with them."
Can you give me an example of this?

CK: Transparencies[8] is a good example: It's a website commissioned for an exhibition that Bielefelder Kunstverein and Kunstverein Nurnberg were doing together. We took the topic of "Transparencies" quite literally: when you visit the website, it collects information about you as a visitor and plays it back to you. Notification windows pop up that display your country, your IP address. It includes the resolution of your computer, your browser, your operating system, what version of Flash you have, what kind of canvas you're using, everything. And we fingerprint[9] you, so that even if

1 http://stefanie-leinhos.de/
2 http://transparencies.de/en/
3 http://modell-und-ruine.werkleitz.de/
4 https://www.instagram.com/p/BpG6qHbjcip/
5 https://0b673cce.xyz/
6 https://knoth-renner.com/
7 https://stefanie-leinhos.de/
8 http://transparencies.de/en/ Transparencies, Website, Bielefelder Kunstverein and Kunstverein Nürnberg (2015)
9 https://github.com/Valve/fingerprintjs2
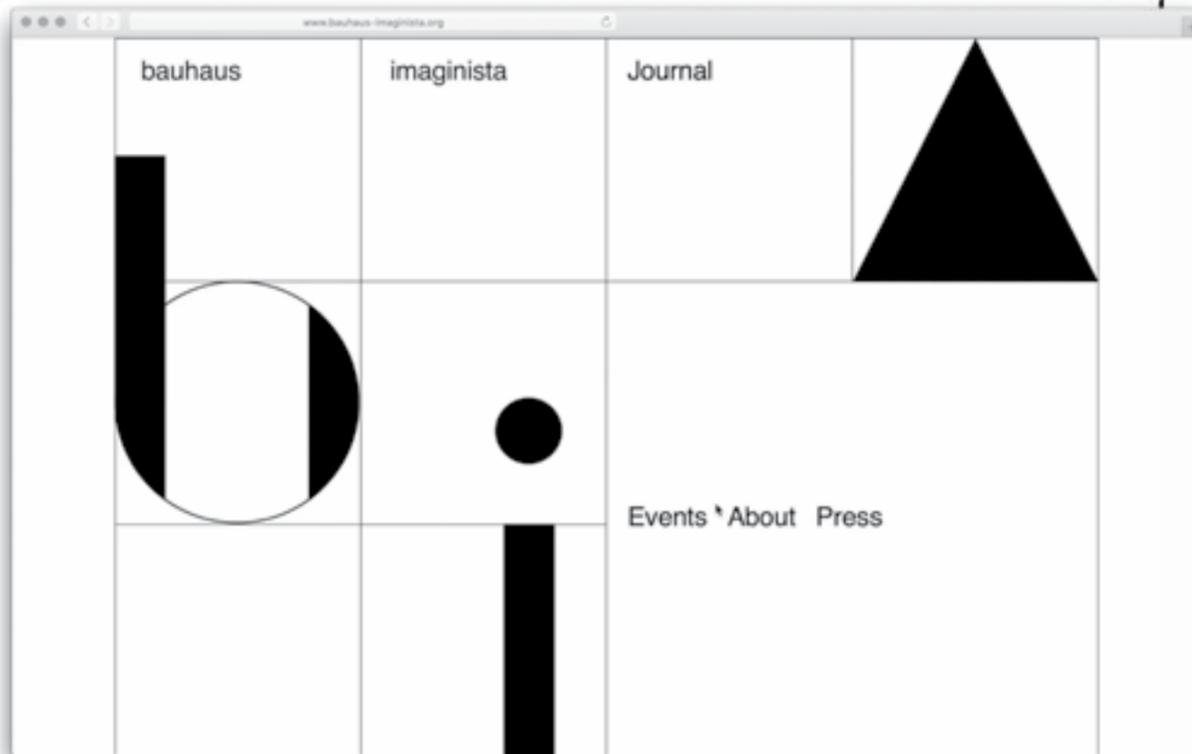
Website for the exhibition *Bauhaus Imaginista*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2019, Screenshot

Website Cryptorave, Screenshot

you delete your cookies, we would still know how many times you've visited us. It sounds super evil, but we were basically doing what every big advertising network is doing with everybody online. Say you Google something—a chair, for example, and then the next day you get an ad for this chair on Instagram. It's the same mechanism, but you don't usually see it happening. We wanted the design to be almost a visual reminder of how this kind of tracking works.

KR: Another example is the Cryptorave site[10]. The art group !Mediengruppe Bitnik asked us to do a website and identity for a project they were working on in collaboration with Omsk Social Club.

CK: Omsk Social Club coined this thing called Real Game Play (RGP), which is a type of role-playing reality similar to a LARP (Live Action Role Play). One of their RGPs was positioned around a new underground group that puts on "cryptoraves" using cryptocurrencies and blockchain technology. Pretty soon, Ben Vickers and Hans Ulrich Obrist were writing about these "cryptoraves" in *Wired*[11] like they were a real thing. So Omsk and Bitnik came to us and said "Can we not actually make it a real thing?"

KR: It's a very simple website. It just has one screen, and you click this button in the middle that says "Start Mining" and it starts to mine the cryptocurrency Monero (XMR). We visualize the mining as a glowing ball of fire, and there are status notifications that pop up while it's mining, so that when you've finished, there's a screen full of them. It mines 11 hours worth of CPU[12] and then gives you everything you need for the rave—a ticket with a QR code that you show at the door and an identity. At the rave, everyone takes on their new identity, like at a LARP.

MM: The Cryptorave sites changed with each

10 Each event in the Cryptorave series had its own visual identity and website, tailored specifically to the location and framing of each rave. Cryptorave #10 for the House of Electronics Art Basel, https://0b673cce.xyz/

11 https://www.wired.co.uk/article/rave-culture-on-the-blockchain

12 Like other miners, Monero uses participants' computing power to validate transactions within the Monero network.

event, right? You did something similar with the website for K-Komma[13], which has eight different versions[14]. What is it about this method of continuous re-making and republishing that appeals to you?

KR: We need to let things go and allow them to disappear. But that's also really hard for designers to do; if you design a book, you usually can keep that book on your shelf and flip through it and show it off for your entire life. For us, a lot of our work will be gone. The sooner you can accept this, the better equipped you are to deal with it in an interesting way.

MM: That's the thing about publishing online, right? Whether it's a website or a piece of writing. The issue that always comes up around digital publishing is volume—the sheer amount of online content we're expected to sift through. A printed publication has a beginning and an end, and, as a result, it has a sort of heft and a way of demanding your undivided attention that reading online doesn't. There's simply a different durational quality to publishing online than publishing offline—and, as you were saying, as soon as you accept this difference, you can do something interesting with it.

KR: There is still nothing being articulated regarding how to publish online in an appropriate way, and, of course, it depends entirely on the content, the authors, and the audience. Publishers sometimes ask us about the best way to move from the analog world into the digital publishing world. For them, it's often about saving money and resources, and that's fundamentally wrong—in our experience, you

13 https://k-komma.de/

14 V1: https://k-komma.de/_archive/01/
V̄2: https://k-komma.de/_archive/02/
V̄3: https://k-komma.de/_archive/03/
V̄4: https://k-komma.de/_archive/04/
V̄5: https://k-komma.de/_archive/05/
V̄6: https://k-komma.de/_archive/06/
V̄7: https://k-komma.de/_archive/07/

need the same effort and amount of editing, and, ultimately, a handcrafted design that successfully translates the content onto a screen visually.[15]

MM: Was that your experience with your work for ARCH+ [16], or the journal for the *Bauhaus Imaginista* exhibition[17]?

CK: In a way, those two projects were very different. For ARCH+, the idea was that they wanted to put one issue of the print magazine online. They were thinking print-first. Then they hired us to translate this one issue onto the web, so we started by thinking about how to translate the Table of Contents of the magazine into the online world. On the website, you can scroll through and see a collapsed view with all the headlines; when you click on one, the article folds out. It feels like a body of work, in the same way that a printed publication does.

The *Bauhaus Imaginista* is different, because it's the journal for a big exhibition, and they had all of these researchers from all over the world publishing their texts at different times. Sometimes these texts are translated, sometimes not. There was no real hierarchical structure. It's more like a pool of content. So that's how we structured the website.

KR: There's a nice feature on the website that isn't immediately obvious—when you're reading an article, you can click a button in the bottom right-hand corner that says "Add this text to your collection!" In this way, you can build your own private library. Once you have a good selection, you can download these articles as a PDF reader.

MM: This is a popular phenomenon right now—being able to download online texts as PDFs. *The Serving Library* [18] does it, and The Creative Independent.[19]

CK: In the beginning, I didn't really understand it, but a lot of people love it—that they can save things on their desktop and collect and hoard them.

KR: PDF will stay forever. You cannot destroy the PDF.

MM: It's funny, because PDFs are so clunky, they should almost be seen as anti-digital publishing or something. But you can design all of these inventive ways of reading online, and we all still want to download it into a PDF and read it that way.

CK: It's still kind of fun, to gift a file or to get a file. It's yours, you bought it; you can collect it, put it in a folder. You can read it on a plane, even if you have no internet. It's such an old format, but it's still around—it's kind of stood the test of time.

MM: It occurs to me, looking through your sites, that they are polar opposites to the design template sites built by something like Squarespace or Wordpress. What are your opinions concerning templated websites versus handmade websites?

CK: We're not against templates—if friends need a website, but don't have the time or the money to pay for one, we advise them to use those. It's an accessible tool, and you can also hack the templates and make them more custom, have fun with it. It's just part of the internet, but it also makes everything look the same.

KR: Templates have helped lead to the streamlined, boring, glossy, "untouchable" internet that we now see a lot of the time. But the real issue regarding templates is content. They've reinforced this notion of how the normal, professional internet should look. This also means that right-wing groups can hide within this normal internet, because their templated websites look trustworthy and authoritative, at least in terms of how we've accepted that the internet should look. It's also hard to know who is designing the template, and who will get paid for the template.

Website for the exhibition *Transparencies*, Bielefelder Kunstverein / Nürnberger Kunstverein, 2016, Screenshot

Normally, they're not made by people in Europe or the US, but in Bangladesh or India, where the people who make them get paid poorly. There's a whole economy behind these template engines. We don't use templates, and that's not what people come to us for. But when we were starting out, we did wonder if maybe it would be easier for us to buy a template and then alter it. We realized very quickly that it's so much easier to start from scratch so you can really do what you want to do and make it customized.

CK: A lot of people don't have portfolio sites anymore—a lot of people just use Instagram. In 2008, every student of graphic design needed a website—you needed a portfolio and your own domain. But I think that's fading. Only few of our students have a personal website.

MM: What's the last thing you read online? What offline?

KR: I recently went through a text[20] online that was recommended by one of our students from the Digitales Grafik class at the HFBK Hamburg. The text is written by Open AI, a company that researches how artificial intelligence can benefit all of humanity. They trained a model of 40 GB of internet texts to generate new texts, but in the end they didn't release this model to the public as they normally would have done. They were afraid that the software would be used to generate misleading news and to automate the production of abusive or fake content. We know that bots are already in charge of more than 50% of the internet traffic, but with AI the quality, the coherence, and the humanity of the text reached a completely new level. I've also been reading a book by Ted Chiang called *The Lifecycle of Software Objects.* It's a beautiful story about the social relationships of software and humans.
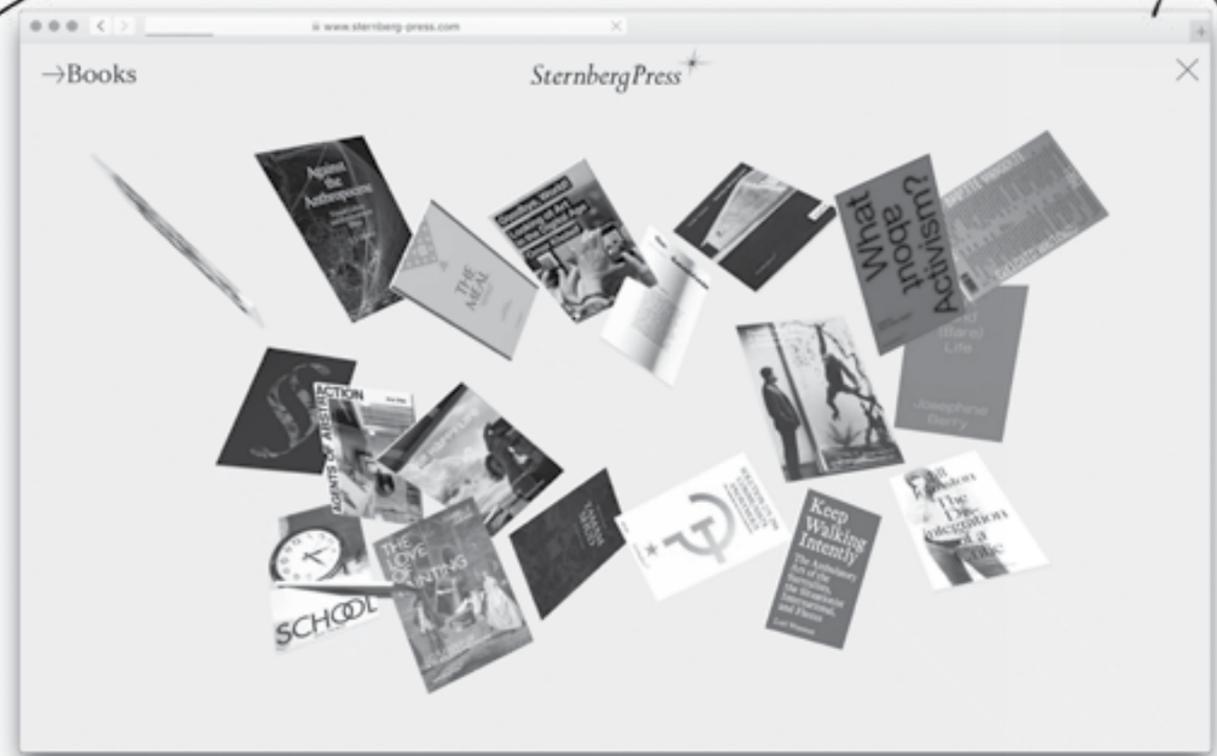
CK: I just read an article[21] about

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15 There are a few examples to look at, such as *Poetic Computation#*, which offers interesting tools for navigating, quoting, and customizing the design of a text. *Altered States#* by RISD seems to be interesting in terms of how they translated a traditional way of designing catalogues onto the screen, with footnotes, small columns, additional texts, and pagination. And for the German architecture magazine ARCH+, we designed a single issue as an online reader# for their 50th anniversary. As part of this project, we tried to claim linear reading on a digital platform — which is quite possibly a mistake in itself, but worth it. I've collected some more interesting examples in the channel: https://www.are.na/konrad-renner/online-reader

16 http://www.archplus.net/reader/home/ausgabe/229/ ARCH+ 229, In the End: Architecture, Online Reader, ARCH+, with Lamm & Kirch (2017)

17 http://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/ Bauhaus Imaginista, Online journal with Systemantics (2018)

18 http://www.servinglibrary.org/

19 https://thecreativeindependent.com/

20 https://openai.com/blog/better-language-models/

21 https://www.republik.ch/2019/12/21/der-politische-troll?fbclid=IwAR-1365VLhv5QJ4oC-AgVG-j2XARtj8-ip6MevAZ5-NX-pPkhr5w9iol_ouuNA

Website for Sternberg Pres, Screenshot

political trolls that compares the political style of Donald Trump and Boris Johnson with the way that online trolls behave and act. It cites Professors Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler's 2009 book about authoritarianism, which predicted a new type of voter, postulating that 40% of American voters are looking for a leader who gives them order, control, and hierarchies. The last book I read was the biography of Steve Jobs, and it made me wonder how much we have paid for the technical progress that we have made, in terms of our emotional discomfort. So now I am reading *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth* by Amy C. Edmondson.

Meg Miller is a writer and editor living between New York and Berlin. She's senior managing editor for AIGA's *Eye on Design* and editorial director at Are.na. Her byline has also appeared in *The Atlantic, Quartz, Fast Company, The Creative Independent*, and *The Serving Library*, among others.

Yvonne Zindel

In Zeiten permanenten Datenwachstums ergeben sich für Hacker ganz neue Möglichkeiten. Wie produktiv der Hack als künstlerische Methode sein kann, zeigt die Autorin an ausgewählten Beispielen

Nora Al-Badri, Nikolai Nelles, *The Other Nefertiti*, 2015; 3D-Scan der Nofrete

Während einer lecture performance des Künstlers Ariel Schlesinger im Kunstverein Braunschweig begegnete mir 2011 zum ersten Mal die Denkfigur des „Hacks" in der Kunst. Ariel Schlesinger beschrieb damals seine Jugendleidenschaft, als „Hobo" durch Amerika zu reisen, als blinder