

**Michael Najjar**

*Peter Haag*

*first published in ETALKS, Dubai, 2006*

Who is pushing the borders of photography to new limits? ETALKS discusses the latest developments with artist Michael Najjar and discovers that Dubai is part of it.

**Notions of simulation and hyper-reality in the realm of digital technology seem to be the key in your work. What is your core philosophy about art? How do you see and understand art? How would you like the world to understand your approach?**

The central theme of my work is the telematic or information-driven society. I am concerned with the key components of this societal structure shaped by technological developments and information flows - the impact of new technology towards our society, the relationship between real and virtual space, and the magic circle encompassing the human and the image.

In my view art has to reflect current developments in our society as well as to integrate historical and cultural backgrounds. My approach is the impact of technology towards society. We are experiencing an enormous acceleration in this field, but everything has its historical roots. For example, look at Greek mythology. Since Prometheus has stolen the fire from the gods providing it to humankind, technology is the driving force of cultural and societal development. Like never before in human history nowadays the technological development is changing our environment, our way of living, our minds, our bodies and in the near future our biological evolution. To understand this and to transform it into a piece of art you have to know where it comes from. The further backward you look, the further forward you can see.

**Today's society is information-driven and technologically addicted. Your art very often bridges the gap between present and future. We would be very intrigued to learn what you know about the future habitat of the human being?**

My work catches contemporary trends whilst projecting future social structures as visions and utopias in the throes of dynamic technological change. Derealisation, disembodiment

and dematerialisation are the core elements of this process. Another key component is acceleration. Most of the people are not able to reflect on the enormous changes because it's going too fast, they just accept it. As an artist my assignment is to filtrate, concentrate and transform these aspects into allegories and metaphors that make people aware of the fact that we are living on a curve. That means we are facing an exponential change which will lead to an elementary transformation of what it means to be human.

**Netropolis is a unique concept where panoramas of a city from various angles are pasted over each other. These pictures are an optical condensation of the city's appearance as well as a concentration of different information units. What is this particular concept all about? How did it evolve? How do you create those masterpieces and in particular the Dubai motif?**

The work series entitled Netropolis is an exploration of the way global cities will develop in the future; of similar magnitude to the impact of the industrial revolution in the late 19th century, it is now computer networks and the information society based on them which are the main vehicles for change, the key elements transforming the face of our urban living spaces. In my view a huge megacity is nothing else but an embodiment of information density.

To realise these pieces I have travelled to all those important megacities all over the world. In every city I went up on one of the highest towers to take four shots in the four directions. Later these four pictures are interwoven into each other with different levels of density by a programmed algorithm. The result is a portrait of each city showing urban complexity and information density. At the same time it is compression of time, because it also refers to the historical development of the city.

There is also a video work, titled 'the invisible city' combining all the cities, a permanent state of transformation which is the metaphor for the constantly growing and transforming information space in between the cities.

Dubai belongs to the important megacities at the beginning of this century because the city has a vision of the role it wants to play in the global game. It has become an important platform for business, information and leisure activities. High-tech architecture and futuristic

urban planning concepts are transforming the city.

The proximity to the desert and the most futuristic architecture is unique. It's a city under construction, only comparable to Berlin in the nineties and Shanghai nowadays. What I am still missing is the cultural development. Art and culture are key components of every important megacity. Museums, festivals, theatres, art fairs have to be installed in Dubai.

**You lived and worked in Rio de Janeiro, Madrid, Havana, Tokyo and New York. How have these cities contributed to your art? What are your most vivid impressions of each of these cities that have influenced your life and your work?**

As an artist living and working in the first decade of this century, my life has become completely globalised. The organisation of my projects and the worldwide exhibitions are as much as possible virtualised. This leads to the effect that it does not matter where I am, as long as I am connected to the net.

Nevertheless those cities have a strong influence on me. Rio de Janeiro is the most inspiring city to me, Tokyo is way ahead of the technological and urban development, Havana is a time capsule where information flows are restricted and controlled, New York is still the centre of the art world. My lead gallery Bitforms is based there, all my new series are launched in New York. When I am developing a new concept, I am looking which spot in the world is the best place to observe the societal transformations I am looking for. Then I go there to get inspired and to realise my work.

**Although you have been a freelance photographer since 1993, your art is not photography in a traditional sense. The application of technology and digitalisation seems to be crucial to bring across your messages. How did you become such an expert in digital visualisation?**

I was always intrigued by photography but also by computers. When the digital transformation of photographs began, let's say in the early nineties, I realised very quickly, that this new technology will break the borders of a 150 year old medium completely. I felt that this is my way of using photography as a medium to create a new form of art.

Using the new tools for developing strong media reflective and conceptual art, I became one of the founders of the so called 'hybrid photography', a mixture of analogue and

digital photographic elements, pushing the borders of photography to new limits.

**Artists are known to see things differently than others and each expression embodies a particular way of seeing, feeling or sensing. Although not disconnected, they live and breathe creativity that can sometimes take them on a journey out of the real world. How do you balance your imaginative and practical side?**

That's very difficult. I am living exactly in the world I am referring to in my works. I am living inside the complex structure of a Metropolis piece, all the time connected to hundreds of people and ongoing projects. I have to travel a lot, which means a lot of time is lost just by transferring the atoms of my body from one place to another place.

A lot of things take too long and get too complicated. I definitely would prefer to use my body directly as an interface being connected to the net instead of using this laptop computer. I am convinced that the human body has to adapt itself to the speed of the information flows. Nevertheless I need to log out from time to time to empty my brain for new ideas. The best place for me to do this is Rio de Janeiro.

**You have studied at the Bildo Academy for Art+Media in Berlin and your art has been purchased by various German museums. How does the art market feel about contemporary digitalised art today? What are the challenges that you face?**

I think the term 'digitalised art' is not appropriate. It's rather 'art developed and produced with digital technologies'. Being media reflective, the content refers to technology and digitalisation. This fact leads to a division of who understands and collects your art. Collectors of my generation have more connectivity with my works than somebody who is in his seventies.

If collectors are buying a Najjar, they are buying a part of their own life and at the same time a utopia of the life of their children. The art market is of course a part of the information driven, globalised world. Especially in the last five years this has accelerated a lot. Maybe that's one of the reasons why museums and private collectors worldwide appreciate my work.

**You are working on a complete new project, Bionic Angel, what is this concept all about and what are your inspirations behind it?**

The New York series Bionic Angel takes as its starting point the future transformation and technological control of human evolution. Rapid developments in the field of so-called 'g-r-i-n technologies' - genetics, robotics, information and nano-technologies - are changing our bodies, minds, memories, and identities, but also have an impact on our progeny. These technologies all converge with the aim of enhancing human performance.

Prenatal genetic determination enables children to be built to plan. Clone bodies become depositories for ersatz organs whilst manipulation of atomic structure creates new bodies which far outstrip the old ones in terms of robustness, elasticity and durability. The new bodies are adapted to the needs of the high-speed data highway. These developments based on genetic algorithms and neuronal networks mean that the biological evolution can now be controlled; they open up the way to a new and superior form of existence for the human being.

Referring to idealised body worlds from antiquity and the Renaissance, the work series Bionic Angel takes up themes of metamorphosis from classical Greek mythology as treated by the roman poet Ovid. Scenarios of creatures in the throes of transformation articulate the inevitability of genetic self-creation in the future of human history. The moment of metamorphosis itself serves as the key metaphor for the technology-driven transformation of the human body in its future post human and possibly immortal existence.

**What is it about your work as an artist that you enjoy most? How do you spend time at leisure?**

What I enjoy most is the freedom to be creative and to do what I want to do. There is no separation between working time and leisure in my life.