

IMAGE-SHIFT

WWW.IMAGE-SHIFT.NET

BACKGROUND

image-shift (formerly also known as bildwechsel) is a graphic design studio based in Berlin, dedicated to cultural, social and political graphic and communication design in print and other media. The studio was founded by Sandy Kaltenborn in 1999, later joined by Pierre Maite in 2004. The duo prefer to base their work on companionship rather than on the conventional client-designer relationship as determined by the ideologies of the service industries. This way, they approach projects collaboratively with questions around the social, cultural and political relations of what they are about to produce. This allows them to produce design and content that they are interested in, rather than limiting themselves to the wrapping and styling of content that society does not need. Aware of the specific responsibility of visual producers as those who have the power to shape a certain discourse, image-shift are working for society and not for the market.

AREAS OF ENGAGEMENT

image-shift work with cultural institutions such as museums, artist-run spaces and other exhibition spaces, for small and big foundations (cultural and political), for socially-engaged associations and political activist groups and for publishers, as well as teaching and lecturing occasionally at universities (national and international). Examples of image-shift clients include The German Federal Cultural Foundation, The House of World Cultures (HKW) in Berlin, Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (RLS), The New Society of Art (NGBK), documenta 13 (d13), Anne Frank Center in Berlin, bbooks publishers, Fels (activist group).

FUNDING

Funded through the work the studio does for paying clients and through collaborations with other groups. Additionally: autonomous fund-raising for self-initiated projects.

DEVELOPMENT

1999: Sandy Kaltenborn sets up the studio

2004: Pierre Maite joins the studio

LOCATION

Berlin, DE, 3,490,445 inhabitants

CONVERSATION

This conversation with Pierre Maite was held in July 2011 in image-shift's new studio space in Kreuzberg, Berlin.

Bianca: How did you and Sandy start to work together?

Pierre Maite: While I was still a student in a small city south of Paris, I was working with a political group outside the art school called "alternative libertaire", but I was slightly frustrated with what they were doing and how they understood visual communication at that time. So I was interested in meeting other people whose work I liked. Out of these people, Gerard Paris Clavel from Ne Pas Plier was the most interesting one to me, because he was not afraid to put his cards on the table, to speak freely about the economy and the politics of his practice. He recounted the story of Grapus [a famous French graphic design collective which evolved out of the '68 student rebellion in France], how it grew up, about '68 and how, back then, they could rely on an economic basis of mostly state founding. He also spoke about his living situation in the suburb of Paris where he has his atelier, which is provided by the city and without which he would not be able to support his practice financially speaking.

It was quite good to hear all this as a student, because the main political design I knew from places like the Chaumont Poster Festival always leaves you with the question of why these posters are never in the street. In these places, there is no contextualisation of the work, so you just have nice images in a book, but then, that's it. The whole context of production and distribution is really important and sometimes a xeroxed A3 poster has much more meaning in the social context it comes from than an A0 silk-screened one with 10 colours.

Most of the work we did as students was really de-contextualised; we were just in production mode for the school or the teachers. Even when some of us would take work outside, for example in the form of street art, there was no back-and-forth of ideas between the "inside" and the "outside".

So, Gerard told me about some other people that I could meet and one of them was Sandy, who at the time had been running his studio for something like four or five years. So, I just came here to Berlin and we discussed that I could do an internship with him for three months, which, in the end, I extended to six months.

But, after that, I went back to France because I had to pay back my student debts. Back in France, I worked in a print shop making advertising for six months. Once the money was paid back, I met with Sandy again and we decided to continue to work together.

Bianca: How did image-shift change when it became a collaborative practice and how did your background play into that change?

Pierre: Developing a studio from one into two people does change a lot, of course: the structure changes and we also bring in interests from different fields. We both studied graphic design, but the school where I studied was like a mixture between art and graphic design. I never learnt about fonts or design programs; you learnt whatever you wanted to. The diploma was very arty and there was no real framing. So, I never really learned graphic design, but I was interested in it and we learned more or less through doing and through making mistakes. It was not the classical school where one learns about fonts and relationships with clients. The problem with this kind of art school is that you are pretty much isolated—you never work with other fields. It was a closed world. The engagement was just between students and professors talking about nice images, but not about the social usage of them. Images can have a really strong social impact and it is not just about making something nice or technical.

Fabio: On our BA, we were encouraged to go out and research, to bring our own interests into the projects. But what I missed from that school was a preparation for the “real world”. What do you do with all these nice, social and political ideas? People end up going into some standard design agency because they don’t know how to carry on their practice in a more sustainable way.

Pierre: That is the problem when you are in a sort of cocoon with no interconnection with the outside. This interconnectedness is something we try to bring into schools when we do workshops. Right at the beginning of the economic crisis, we ran a workshop in Stuttgart where we asked people to observe how the crisis was touching them, their neighbours and their surroundings. We just threw them into the city to make interviews, to go to their baker or to their neighbour, to find out what this crisis had to do with them. In the end, they produced a kind of newspaper, which they took back outside in order to get some feedback, to get reac-

tions and to see how effective the work that they were producing was. This was not about making a fantastic graphic design product, this was about having a process, which is going outside an institution and coming back inside. But it was also a collective process. Often, in art schools, you get people working alone, so we try to bring with us this idea of people working together, and students are not really used to that. However, the reality is not that you just sit on the computer and think, “Yes, this could be a nice image”, but that you are talking with friends, you have some people bring a project to you, or you are taking about a project to other people. So, it is a continuous back-and-forth between people. You discuss images with other people. This is quite important—taking the responsibility to talk about images, to contextualise them. Therefore, when doing workshops, we try to create this kind of structure, where students make images together, where they have to talk about them and where they also share images, in order not to sacralise them as belonging to people individually. Ultimately, we shouldn’t think we are the owners of our images because as part of a collective project, we are just part of a process.

Bianca: How does this approach to collaboration translate in your practice?

Pierre: The way we process information and ideas between the two of us is a bit chaotic. (laughs) The format of the process is changing all the time. We used to always have a ping-pong process: one of us starting with an idea and handing it to the other one, then we would talk about it and so it would go back and forth until we found something interesting. But now, we also work separately and then just exchange our point of view. And then we also talk with the other people involved in the project about our proposals. Sometimes, we can spend weeks and fight about how things could be. In the end, there is not one clear process and we are constantly learning from each other. Also, we are producing text and concepts. The so-called “creative work” is actually only 30% of our work, the rest is discussion, organisation, cleaning up, bookkeeping, etc. We are doing everything: yesterday, for example, we spent the day building a shelf for the new studio space and this is as much part of our work as everything else.

Most of the time, when people bring projects to us, they already know what we do and how we work. They know that if they come to us, it is not like a service where they come and say, “We want a poster with this image”, etc. Most of the time, the people who come

to us know that it will be a discussion and they are expecting us to also work on the concept. It is more like, “We have this project, we would like it to speak to the outside, what do you think?”. The way the process takes place is that we try to meet the people we are working for many times, in order to have a lot of talk and discussion. We don’t feel like we have the answer or the truth; we make proposals that are to be discussed. Often, the people in the project don’t have much knowledge about communication, but they understand the background of the project and therefore these intense discussions are quite important.

For example, there is this job centre project we are currently involved in. The leading group of activists working on it already spent more than a year there and they are not approaching it conventionally—“We know what you need and the flyers are already printed: I want one Euro more a month.” Instead, they go there and conduct interviews with people. They started from the fact that, in this neighbourhood, at least 30% of the population have something to do with the job centre. This is a big amount, but nobody is really talking about it, about the whole situation, the whole pain and the whole trouble with precarity. So, the idea is to give visibility to all this. The activists we work with went to the job centre and organised a breakfast in order to talk to the people. With this project, the idea is to create a space for communication and to give visibility to struggle, hope and things like that. This means, of course, that they need to deal with one of the problems of capitalism, neoliberalism, and advertising: the capacity for designers to overtake the critique, to digest it and to construct a kind of false image of it that ends up in a campaign with peoples’ faces and ‘nice’ words. But this campaign can be completely different if the words on the posters are coming from the people themselves. I think it’s Gerard Paris Clavel who said that, often, answers are given to people who didn’t ask anything. Here, the point is less that we are interested in speaking ourselves, but that we want to create spaces where the relevant people have the opportunity to speak.

As for an example of a self-initiated project, last year, we made an event about collectively-organised structures in Berlin—cafes, printing shops and other places run in a co-operative way. I think that today, there is a bigger responsibility for left, radical movements to not only critique capitalism, but to show that there are alternative ways of working and getting organised. And so, this is one of the things we found interesting: there are a lot of structures that are working without a hierarchy. They are not only about making work for money,

but they are also trying to get engaged socially. So, we organised an event with friends which was a series of lectures, discussions, meetings and also parties. Around that event, we made a card game that could be distributed, where people could see which kinds of collectives there were in Berlin. This is an on-going project where we are working with journalists and some other friends who are working in the theoretical world. This about practice and discourse.

Fabio: So how did you finance this self-initiated project?

Pierre: This was financed via some parties we organised, and every collective involved also contributed in order to be able to generate all this. From the money generated from the parties, we were also able to establish a collective pot from which we could finance the other things we wanted to add to the project, like the website with interviews and also a bit more theory about the collectives, some history and some daily practice, so we could address questions like: “Why are you doing a collective?”, “What is the collective for you?”, “Why do you think it is important as a political practice?”, “What are the problems?”. And also the parts that might be more technical: how to start a collective, what the funding possibilities are, etc. This is what we are able to finance from this collective pot. What is also interesting is that you can see that between the collectives, there is a lot of support and solidarity.

Next year, we would like to organise a long ‘day of the collective’: to make a map with every collective and to tour the city to give visibility to that, trying to show the transversality of it all: organising a lecture in the printing factory, having a café who organises a breakfast in the metal workshop and things like that.

Fabio: Do you see that in your case, life and work are completely overlapping and there is no real separation between your activities?

Pierre: I don’t think of “life” and “work” as separate things. Maybe it is a failure. And a big part of our so-called ‘life outside of studio’ is coming into it. We like to share project with friends and people we like. We also both have “projects” outside the studio. Even if, a lot of the time, sooner or later, they might become a “studio project” as well. For example, I’m living in a house project located in Kinzigstraße 9 in Berlin Friedrischain [K9, www.kinzig9.de]. It is a chance to live with a lot of different people [35], where we share a whole house

that includes a silkscreen atelier and a bar where we can organise parties, show movies, organise discussions—and everything is self-organised. The space is open to other groups and once a year, we organise an open day where people can visit the house and get information about the house's history, its structure, etc.

Bianca: Are there many places like this in Berlin or are you actually living an exception?

Pierre: There are other places like this, but there are fewer and fewer. Nearly every project that did not manage to buy its house got kicked out. We are not the owners of our house, there is a collective structure from the '70s/'80s in place, which buys the houses and when you live in such a house, you are part of the decision-making process for everything. This means that we pay a kind of rent into this structure, which is in turn paying back the credit for buying the house, plus its future renovation.

Bianca: In terms of this kind of structure, does it reduce your expenses in comparison to living in other places?

Pierre: I pay €240, all inclusive. At the beginning, this was average in relation to other flats in Berlin, but now, it is really cheap compared to the rest. The idea was also to try to keep the rent affordable, so that nearly everybody could live in there. But then, every house has a different structure internally: some houses have only one kitchen and the inhabitants are sharing everything. I know, for example, that the *WG* [*Wohngemeinschaft*, a shared flat] where I'm living used to have a collective financial pot: all the inhabitants used to put all the money they earned into it and then they would just share it evenly. This does not exist anymore in my house, but it is still talked about and at least there is a common pot for the food. This means that there is a balance between people that earn a bit more money and the ones earning a bit less, giving our structure solidarity.

Fabio: You mentioned that you are 35 people living in this house. Is everyone active in the cultural field or are the backgrounds very different?

Pierre: We are all very different. The oldest is about 63. He comes from a radical left movement from the '60s/'70s and is still politically active, while the youngest are children. There are students, but people are do-

ing a lot of different jobs. And in fact, there aren't so many people who are working in the cultural field. It is just really diverse and this is what I really enjoy there.

Fabio: To what extent do you think that it is actually the particularity of a city like Berlin to allow your design practice and life to evolve the way it does? And what other daily practices, apart from living in this housing project, do you feel permit you to carry on your creative practice the way you do?

Pierre: When I'm talking to friends who are in different cities, but who have the same kind of practice, I can see that we are at quite an advantage in being in Berlin: prices are not yet so high and so we can still manage. We don't have to run so fiercely after the funding in order to be able to do our kind of work on a full-time basis. Moreover, what gives us the possibility to do all this relates to the whole movement of free spaces from the '70s and '80s. People are used to get a bit more organised. From what I know about Paris, for example, is that there are just a few of these social/self-organised projects and that they are really struggling. Here, there are still these housing projects that allow people to self-organise activities. In places like Paris, you get kicked out really fast and then it gets very difficult. In that sense, we are quite lucky and what I really appreciate here is that you don't only get discourse, but you get practice, too. I know that in Paris, people talk about how things could be different, but here, with all these collectives, we see discourse put into practice, like, for instance, regarding the need to deal with hierarchies in groups. The social political practice is a step further, because it does not stop at talking about possibilities, but you are testing them in practice; you are facing the problems and then having to change and think about the structure, consider what can be different. So this is quite interesting.

Fabio: Besides these collective support structures, what other structures and resources do you dip into? Are there some things in the back of your mind that give you security?

Pierre: Basically, we are financed indirectly by state funding through groups and institutions we work with. We are pretty much dependent on all this activism and projects taking place around us. About 80% of the time, it is people bringing projects to us and they usually come with a clear financial plan. They come to us with the project and the funding, and say, "Look, this is

the project we have, are you interested?”. It’s not like they come and say, “We have x amount of money for posters.” We are also very interested in the financial part of a project—what does the budget look like, does everyone get something? It often happens that people find money to finance a campaign, but they all do that for free—a lot of the time, we also do that for free. How to break the cycle of continued self-exploitation? Sometimes, people don’t want to get money from the outside, because you can become kind of dependent. But funding also gives us some freedom. It is important that no one in the process is exploited or exploits her/himself. Often, you can just do things on your own, but we try to organise from the beginning: what could be interesting to produce, how much work will that be, how can we manage to pay everybody involved? This is what is interesting in this in-between: often activism is done by students, doing things in their spare time, but with these more professional collectives, you see that they have a different relationship towards the economy. But, of course, we are quite precarious, because we own nothing and we don’t have rich parents. So, if stuff collapses, then it collapses. If state funding is cut, then we get directly hit. Somehow, you get used to this situation and that is just the way it is. When I was working in an advertising agency in France, I realised that I could not continue to do that sort of work. In general, I think that all of my friends, everyone I know, can make it at the moment, but if, tomorrow, the social or cultural funding gets cut, we are all fucked.

Bianca: You say that you invest 80% of your time in work you do with groups and organisations and that in the remaining 20% you do self-initiated projects. How are you organising the funding for these self-initiated projects?

Pierre: All the time, we are trying to get a balance between those projects we do for free, those we do for a low fee and those that are better paid. We treat them on the same level: we just try to make projects we are interested in. So, there are months where it is OK money-wise and months where it is shit. We constantly need to figure out when and where to be careful in order to keep the balance.

It is important not to lie about the finances—my experience as a student is that no one really wants to talk about their economic situation. Maybe some schools are pushing the more classic entrepreneurial approach, saying that you have to be able to fight, and in some other schools—like the one where I was—it is

completely taboo to speak about anything outside the institution: the outside is evil. You would want to get a kind of mix, but more in the sense that you have to be aware of the reality of the situation. Therefore, it is important to see how other studios are working, what finance, daily life and social structure they have.

Fabio: Are you sometimes bringing interns into your practice? How do you deal with the labour they provide?

Pierre: We have, from time to time, had interns but there is no standard procedure—we just try to see what finance they can get from somewhere else and what finance they can get from here. This means that some of them come here already being fully funded, let’s say from Leonardo or similar programs, or sometimes we pay them completely, or it is a mixture. This is part of the deal we are making with them. In general, I would say the economic aspect is not the most important one, because you can manage somehow. More important is that we try to have an appropriate project, which might fit the person coming in. This means that sometimes, people ask us if they can come for a certain period of time and we say, “Yes, come, but maybe in 6 months”, because we might have an appropriate project. We find it difficult for interns to work on projects that are super stressful, where you just got a few days or weeks to make the stuff. So, when people come in, we think it is also really important that they can spend some time looking into house projects, visiting collectives, getting lost, going to parties, making friends, and so on. For interns, we try to get projects which are not too stressful and then we let them take a large amount of responsibility for this project. Sometimes, we just share the work on the same level as the intern. This means that when they come here, we are not only offering an internship but they really have a strong responsibility too. This means they don’t just do executive work, but we are all participating at the meetings, we all discuss the content, the concept, the budget and they have a decision-making capacity. And sometimes it can be that they really carry one or two projects, and we are just supporting them.

Bianca: For how long do you have interns working in your studio?

Pierre: At least three months, sometimes it is six months. The problem for us is to be able to really plan far ahead. For now, we have an idea about how the

next three months might be, but then we don't really know. This makes it difficult to plan for internships in the longer term.

Bianca: Does the fact that you cannot plan ahead longer than three to six months affect you psychologically?

Pierre: Sure. But there are periods where you don't care and there are periods where it is annoying. Right now for us, with the whole moving and renovation here, money is going out and it takes us a lot of time away from work, so we feel a lot of pressure. Of course, the economy and the precarious situation is stressful. We try to give as little psychological space as possible to the economic problem, but it is there. For us, it's also really important to manage not to work too much and to be able to take some distance from what we are doing. Just because otherwise, you are this productive machine that is doing stuff and you just get blind. But there are so many interesting projects; it is sometimes difficult to say no.

Bianca: For your practice, your life in general, where would you wish it could go in the future?

Pierre: I think that our wishes are less around the studio itself, but more about society and political changes.

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