

An Interview with Tobias Rehberger by Mai Abu ElDahab

Kitsch, Destruction & Education

An extract from a conversation between Tobias Rehberger and Mai Abu ElDahab in the kitchen of Rehberger's Frankfurt home on 6 November, 2005. Rehberger is a full-time teacher at the Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste (Staedelschule) in Frankfurt am Main, where he himself was once a student.

MAD – What were we saying?

TR – We were discussing the idea of the art school. Florian [Waldvogel] asked me to write about what could be the ideal school. I thought that that should be easy because I have a strong idea of what I think and what I'm doing with my students at Staedelschule. But it's actually quite complicated because I'm not doing something fixed with my students; I'm doing many different things with them without having a clear pedagogical focus. You see, with each student it's completely different.

MAD – Right.

TR – To one student I have to speak this way, and to another student I have to speak another way. I have approaches which are more productive than others, but only to a certain extent. I would never decide that a particular model would produce a good artist. In the end, the students decide for themselves how to be good artists because a school is about forming something that doesn't exist yet, something which the students themselves have to discover.

MAD – Now that you've been doing this for a while, do you think that you've found certain ways to move in different directions with different people, like a good starting point to foster a certain atmosphere?

TR – In my experience, the first thing you have to do with students who are just beginning is destroy their expectations, this kitsch they enter art school with. They're coming in, saying, 'I've made it, I know what I'm doing' when most of what they know is a very clichéd idea about being an artist and what an art school is and what they're going to learn. So 'learn' becomes a very important word for them to get used to. The first things you have to teach new students is what the school can offer them, as well as what it can't offer and what it shouldn't offer. You have to begin by destroying their idea of what the art school is.

MAD – Have you evolved this process of destruction?

TR – Usually after you destroy these ideas, you have to remake them, or that's what I try to do. I destroy a lot of things, but only what I find to be clichéd ideas about artists' lives, about art, about art school. At the same time you have to help them to feel comfortable with these same ideas. It's not as if you just hammer at them and leave them to pick up the pieces themselves, because this is still a school and it's a protective space. I also try to help them to understand that they can depend upon this protection for a couple of years. They can stay in bed if they like, no problem. It's their responsibility. However, if they choose to deal with me, they also have to accept that I need to destroy certain things, and that I will give my opinions. It's quite a delicate process, in a way, to make them feel that you like them and that you take them seriously. You have to be really hard to them too, but this is also about how seriously you take them. If you just say, 'Fuck off ... this is shit' then it doesn't work. In the end you have to make them understand that they have to find out for themselves. They have a limited time that is given by, I don't know whom, to find out what it is that they're really interested in. So it's very important that the students begin by at least shedding their pre-education somehow, and the idea that they have to do certain things. They don't have to do certain things. They have to do what they really think is important and not what they have been educated to think is important. I'm always saying, 'You have to surprise me. You have to go beyond what I am telling you. Otherwise you can only reach my level and that's not very interesting because you're already there.' If you're

able to get rid of the kitsch you're carrying around, then you almost automatically get there. It could be super boring but at least it's something else, and it's your own.

MAD – When I was young I would paint, and I always knew that I was painting what other people were painting. At some point you break through a barrier to where you begin doing something which is yours, which can be really difficult.

TR – Yes, that's the hardest. It has a lot to do with being honest with yourself, and I don't mean it in an entertaining way; it's quite difficult to be honest. It's not that the students shouldn't have points of reference—they should, which is another thing they have to learn. Many students think that in art school they're detached from the world. Though you do have to move away from it in a certain sense, you shouldn't lose touch with the existing system.

MAD – Are there any texts that you recommend for students when they begin? For example, Walid Raad teaches at Cooper Union. He always begins by giving his students Howard Singerman's *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*. I think for him this can be a way of destroying the kitsch, as you say. Do you have anything similar to this?

TR – I've never thought about it much. I have always begun with the individual student. Some need to be destroyed by different means than others. I also like to think about what somebody needs. I would find it a bit inappropriate to be always using the same hammer, somehow, though it's probably just a question of character. I don't think I would give a book to everybody; there's nothing like the personal discussion. There are so many ways to approach a thing, but there are also so many ways to escape understanding for oneself what is there. I think if you stand there and look at somebody's face and explain something to them, this just has a very different impact.

MAD – I was wondering about, say, showing the person in the desert a Malevich painting or something like this.

TR – I think it would work very well, but it would give too much direction, like a solution. Now that I think about it, maybe that would be something that students would want: 'So I read this book and now I understand. What is the next book you're giving me to make me an artist?' I have the feeling that most people are very shocked when I tell them, 'Now you're in the school, but you should know that you can't learn anything here, you're aware of that?' Then usually their eyes get big and they don't understand why they're in a school where they can't learn anything.

MAD – How did you pick Stedelijk originally as a student?

TR – I was applying to Düsseldorf because I had learned that it was the most famous school with Josef Beuys and blah, blah, blah. He wasn't teaching there any more, but it was a famous school, it was the biggest, and it's still the biggest art school and the most well-known. It was the first art academy in Germany, I knew about that. I also knew about the University of the Arts in Berlin. So I was applying for these two schools. But while skiing in France, I happened to meet a girl from Frankfurt. So I moved here and called the city office to ask if they have an art school here in Frankfurt. Then I applied and they took me. It was pure luck because at that moment Stedelijk was completely changing. When I arrived, Kaspar König also arrived, and a lot of new teachers arrived. I think that, before this, it was one of the most horrible schools you could imagine.

So I was just lucky that all these people arrived and were kind of opening up the whole thing, but I did it basically because of a love affair.

MAD – What's the system? How were you accepted?

TR – There are a couple of ways to be accepted to the school but the main way is by handing in a portfolio. Then all the teachers look at the portfolio, along with five students.

MAD – Is this portfolio in a file somewhere now?

TR – My portfolio? Oh no, you get it back. (laughter) I think my parents still have it somewhere in a cellar ... I don't know. There are usually somewhere between two hundred and fifty and five hundred portfolios and then you choose between fifty and fifteen people to invite for an interview. They still go through this. I think parts are quite stupid, like there was a test in which the applicant creates work on the spot, which I think had to do with wanting to check whether somebody really made the portfolio themselves. We've changed it a little bit already and we're thinking about changing the whole system but the interview is certainly the most important part.

MAD – Who interviewed you? Do you remember?

TR – I remember that Thomas Bayrle was on the committee.

At that time the system was still a little different because they had two committees interviewing at the same time, so some people had to talk to this committee and some people to the other. Now that I know who was in the other committee and who they are, I'm almost certain that I wouldn't have been accepted had I met with the other committee.

MAD – Were you surprised when you got in?

TR – No, I was really sure that I would get in (laughs). My attitude was, 'I'm gonna go there and change everything.' I had no idea what that meant. I just thought, 'I'm so different', because I was so different from everyone else in my village. I figured that I must be different from everyone else here as well.

MAD – Were you shocked to find you weren't so different?

TR – No, I was quite different.

MAD – Really?

TR – Yeah, because somehow I had this idea, at least a very vague idea, that it has to be about conflict, about developing something very different from anything anyone else did. I was very much really longing for this conflict, somehow.

MAD – Was there a moment when you realised, 'Oh, I'm at home now', or was it always something of a conflict?

TR – No, it was both at the same time.

MAD – And then after the first year you chose a teacher?

TR – Right. I had Thomas Bayrle as a teacher for my foundation course, but since that was the last year the foundation existed, he got his own class and I just stayed on with him.

MAD – How did you pick Thomas Bayrle?

TR – At the time I thought he was the most interesting. I stayed with him for basically all five years that I was in the school. For me, he was the most interesting teacher. Gerhard Richter was there for two years. He's certainly a fantastic artist, but I never had the feeling that he was a fantastic teacher.

Thomas Bayrle was always so awake, he was always so open to a lot of things. He had people in the class who wrote text, he had people who dealt

with the computer in a way which was very uncommon in the late eighties. He had painters, he had sculptors, he had everything, and he was quite open, and also vague. Precise and vague at the same time—he could be very hard to understand. When he speaks, he's very metaphoric, so it was always a challenge to interpret what he was talking about. You had to square it with your own interpretation.

MAD – And was he already doing group things then?

TR – Yes, group things mostly. We had a class meeting once a week where we just discussed things. Mostly people's work, but then other things as well. I have to say, I'm now teaching like him a little bit, but not exactly like him, of course. I find it's always very productive to have open discussions in front of the class. It's also very helpful for the people who prefer to just listen. I'm also doing these class critiques. If somebody insists upon having an individual critique, I do that too, though not as often. Most of the time I'm trying to convince people to present their work in front of everyone so it can be an open discussion.

MAD – Do you think many other students found it difficult to work with Bayrle?

TR – A lot of people found it difficult because he wasn't telling them specifically what to do. He would see an object that looked like a plate and talk about the autobahn or something. You really had to understand the way you wanted to relate to his way of speaking. There were people who were frustrated and left the class. He was not the kind of teacher who said, 'You should make this a little bit more like that' and that's fine. It was never about that. It was never about having a catalogue of qualities. He was always trying to find reasons for qualities, but at the same time asking if they are valuable and in what sense they are valuable. Some people might have found it too soft. Just as he would never say, 'This is good because of exactly this' or 'You should also do this and then it's good', he would also never say, 'This is shit.' He would also talk about the autobahn again. I think this was frustrating for a lot of people, but for others it was extremely constructive.

MAD – If I understand correctly, he left for a year and then Martin Kippenberger took over.

TR – The school has a system of guest professors which the students can select themselves. He had a free semester—every seventh semester you take one research semester. At the same time, as the whole school, we invited Kippenberger and Ludger Gerdes, an artist from Munich who was very theoretical. Gerdes would have his seminars and talk about Baudrillard and all that kind of stuff. Kippenberger wasn't taking over Bayrle's class, he created his own class. At the first meeting there were twenty-five people, then at the second there were fifteen, and in the end there were eleven or twelve students, and then it stayed like that. Kippenberger's way of teaching was completely different again. He would just constantly trash everything and tell you how stupid you are. It was very difficult, he had this very strong presence. In the way he lived his life, it was almost as if he wouldn't allow any possibility for another role model to survive next to him. It was very much like a sect. This was extremely counter-productive for a lot of people because it was hard to think with your own head. I would often catch myself wondering, 'Why am I thinking like this? Because that's exactly how Martin would think about it.' It was extremely difficult to keep him from overlapping with your own identity, because he wouldn't allow you to

think about things in a way that was different to his own.

MAD – How do you feel about this pressure now, in retrospect?

TR – If you survive, it's good. I could give a couple of examples of when it was just totally destructive. Many students just adopted his way of thinking, and of course you could do that maybe once or twice, but you can't just be Kippenberger. Of course not. He wouldn't accept anything other than his own way of thinking. He would never say, 'It could be like this, but it could also be like that.' It was always 'like this', nothing else. That's how it was a little bit like a sect. He would tell you something like 'You should leave your girlfriend because you're an artist and you shouldn't have one', or something really related to your personal life. Then he would insist upon that and be personally insulted if you didn't do it. I have to say I was always kind of accepted but I was always also in a way the black sheep of the family. I think it changed in the last couple years of his life when he wasn't teaching as a job. He had moved to Frankfurt, just around the corner from here. When his teaching job was finished, he would just hang out with the same group and go on, because it was never just teaching. It was not about the institution. Also, because he was someone for whom it was very hard to be alone, because when you're alone, I guess, you have to face yourself. He was totally paranoid about self-doubt. He wouldn't allow that—not from himself and not from other people. He always had to have people around him.

MAD – Sounds slightly traumatic.

TR – Yeah, it was traumatic to a certain extent. I learned a lot from him and it was extremely interesting. As a student, he encouraged you with very interesting encounters. For example, as a student you were meeting museum directors or gallery owners. He just dragged us all over the place for these openings and we would meet a lot of artists and friends of his and just sit at a dinner table with them and talk to them. It was extremely good for me.

MAD – Did he thrive on having these protégés?

TR – Totally. He was always—almost paradoxically—raving about school. He was always saying what a stupid thing it is to have an art school, but then when we would go to New York with him he would be super proud, almost childishly proud, to present his students, and he is the professor. It was kind of a paradox. He died when I had just stopped being a student and was starting to be an artist. There are a lot of things I would have liked to talk to him about. Even shortly after I left art school I already felt that the relationship had changed a bit, because he would suddenly consider you to be an artist and not a student anymore.

MAD – Was it a good group of people? Did you have a good chemistry? A lot of the time you find that so much depends upon a moment when you have the right teachers or faculty and the right students; a chemistry that just works. You can't orchestrate that, it can just happen. Did you have that?

TR – The chemistry in between the classes, with the people I was with ... these people were quite good, we hung out almost every day. It was interesting and it was exciting most of the time. We did funny things and stupid things which other students wouldn't have allowed themselves. We also allowed ourselves a certain amount of arrogance. It was definitely a great time, but it had this other side to it, a difficult side.

MAD – I think it always needs both.

TR – Right. Like with Kippenberger, in a way, it was much more about

himself than it was about us. He used us, and we wanted to be used because we thought we could get something out of it. And we got something out of it. For some people it was productive and for others it was not. It was paternal, but in a very conservative way. He was the father, and you don't question the father. It was complex. I can't say that he didn't take care of us. He made a lot of things possible for us. We would go to Vienna for his show, and if somebody didn't have the money to come along he would help him out—not because he wanted this guy to go, he just wanted everybody there. It was also kind of an ego thing for him, in a way.

MAD – How much time did you spend away from Staedelschule between when you were a student and when you began teaching?

TR – About ten years ... nine years.

MAD – That's a long time. Were you excited to return to the place where you studied?

TR – It was funny because I had offers from other schools and I was thinking, 'Should I do it or not?' I was asked a couple of times to teach here, but I didn't feel good about it because there were too many of my friends—some of whom were still in the school.

Then when Daniel Birnbaum asked me to do it, it was the right time because I had been considering taking a teaching job anyway. I realised that I enjoyed it from having done a guest professorship in Munich and a couple other smaller and bigger workshop things. When Daniel asked me, it was so convenient. If I want to teach, it makes the most sense to do it here in Frankfurt. I liked how it was just around the corner so I could go in my pyjamas. It was exciting, yes, but I was also a little bit doubtful, feeling a bit like someone who's married to the school. But then, after a while, I realised that it wasn't a problem. I'm involved, but it's not something I think about every day. I think I can handle it quite well. I still have enough distance and it doesn't disturb my work at all. I have to say that I really enjoy working with the students, which is mostly because the students I have are really interesting. I also liked the way Daniel wanted to run things.

MAD – Did many other people come in at this time, like you?

TR – Daniel was the first, and then I think Michael Krebber and Isabelle Graw and myself, then Wolfgang Tillmans, and then Simon Starling, and then Mark Leckey. There was a great deal of change happening automatically because contracts were running out. Some of the teachers were getting old enough to retire and Daniel just started bringing in a new generation, and of course a bit of a different attitude. I guess this was also part of the reason he took the job—because he saw that he could rebuild the school in a slightly different way. He was an art critic and philosopher, and he was also curating shows a bit and had run an institution before. Kaspar had been working in a university before, in Canada. He was also a curator. I think, after the experience with Kaspar, which was very positive, we wanted the director of the school not to be an artist, but to be somebody who is extremely related to it. I think it's very good again with Daniel, I have to say.

MAD – How much time do you have to be at the school?

TR – You mean in the contract, so to speak? For me it's different than it is for other teachers because I live in Frankfurt. I have a more or less regular class meeting every two weeks. Sometimes I do it every week. Sometimes there will be three weeks in between. It's not completely regular.

MAD — So, being in Frankfurt, you probably have a more intimate relationship with your students.

TR — That's true. You don't always teach in the classroom.

Suddenly you meet four students in a bar and you start talking, and talking is also teaching. Then sometimes people come to my studio. It's not that I'm always available for them, but it's easier than it is for teachers who live in other places. Sometimes I go with them to see a football match, not with the whole class, but maybe three or four students. I like this family structure. It makes it easier for them to understand that if you're very hard on them it's not because you want to insult them or that you don't care. It's quite nice.

MAD — So is there anything totally horrible about the school?

TR — Something horrible about the school? We don't have enough money!

MAD — Or maybe something you find difficult.

TR — I understand, but it's hard ... I never thought much about it. Tell me something which you think is difficult, or possibly negative about the school, just from what you know about it.

MAD — I think—as an outsider—that it could perpetuate the dated master-pupil system a bit. Do you think this is the case?

TR — Yeah, I can see what you mean, but I don't have the feeling that it's so true in general. It might be a little problematic in some classes. If I compare it to a school like Düsseldorf, which has basically the same system of master-pupil, with one professor who is really the master—or the god, we do have that system, but I don't think that this is what we're really presenting in the end. It's also just that the Staedelschule is so small. The students all know each other and they always talk to each other about what's happening in each other's classes and how it is, and 'Why does your teacher always say this?' and 'Why does your teacher never criticise?' and so on. The general atmosphere in the school is totally not about this 'master' thing.

Honestly, for me it's hard to imagine how to make a better school than this one.