

# PICTOPLASMA - CALL FOR PAPERS

to enhance contemporary character design

*In recent years, a new kind of “character design” has been making its mark on the visual world – in media, art and urban landscapes across the globe. From Hello Kitty to Obey Giant, Emily the Strange to Takashi Murakami’s DOB – contemporary character design, abstract and reduced to the essentials, playfully samples and remixes visual codes, making a beeline for our emotional attention.*

It is Pictoplasma’s aim to foster an understanding of this phenomenon as a new era of figurative expression. Based in Berlin, the project has functioned as a global network for heterogeneous “character-related” activities since 1999. Through pictorial encyclopaedias, exhibitions, online archives, conferences and film festivals, Pictoplasma brings together artists and designers from all over the world, encouraging experimentation and pushing the development of this new visual language. In the run-up to the 2nd Pictoplasma Conference in October 2006 in Berlin, Pictoplasma is keen to collect theoretical reflections along the lines of: Body, Narration and Communication.

## **Body**

The key to character design is investing the design with an appearance of life. Animating it in the sense of lending it an “anima” or soul, so that, in the words of French philosopher George Didi-Huberman: “what we see looks back at us”. It is what we project onto the image that triggers this animation – but it is the density and strength of their design that makes characters an ideal screen for our imaginations.

For German art historian Hans Belting who represents the “iconic turn”, there is a strong link between the dead body and the image. According to his anthropological approach, the corpse, being so radically different from the body while alive, was the first ever image. “Images, preferably three-dimensional ones, replaced the bodies of the dead, who had lost their visible presence along with their bodies. Images, on behalf of the missing body, occupied the place deserted by the person who had died.” As a tactile abstraction, dolls and fetishes transported the dead body into the realm of the image. In this sense, character designers can be said to be playing with incorporeality and lifelessness. In digital images, every highlight sparkling in the characters’ eyes reinforces this absence.



Hello Kitty, ESM Artificial



Genevieve Gauckler



Gary Baseman



Friends With You

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The deformation of bodies in images is perhaps a way of taking revenge on their flatness. The industrial sterility of urban collector toys, the charm of plush dolls are other attempts to escape two dimensionality – fetishes in a Freudian sense, one could argue. All around the world, character designers are being driven to the third dimension so they can finally throw their arms round their own creations.



Dennis Tyfus, The London Police

Behind all these strategies lies the graphical quality of the character, making its powerful emotional connection with the viewer. Pictoplasma is looking for theoretical investigations into life and death, physical presence and absence of the body in the image logic of contemporary character design.

## **Narration**

If the body is the origin the character never had, narration is the context from which it is struggling to escape. In traditional animation and comics, characters were subjected to the logic of classical narrative forms, but later generations of designers weaned on MTV, Manga and the Internet follow a visual and systematic approach. In the animation and motion graphics by artists such as Saiman Chow (USA), Tim Hope in his “Minema Cinema” (UK), Tokyoplastic (UK), Lobo (BR) or Adam Elliot (AUS), the character is the physiognomic starting point for the story. And artists such as Friends With You (USA) or Doma (AR) transform their characters into life forms in their own universe with which we humans can interact.



Faiyaz Jaffri



Tokyoplastic

Can we pursue this track and listen to what characters have to tell us without lapsing back into narrative structures? How do we put the characters into narration, without losing the strong visual sensations they evoke? Maybe, it’s not possible to have sensation and narration at the same time. As French philosopher Gilles Deleuze said: “Sensation is that which is transmitted directly, and avoids the detours and boredom of conveying a story”. Pictoplasma wants to gather ideas on ways to escape this sensation/narration dichotomy, and unfold worlds for the characters to act in. A starting point of reference might be the “uncanny”. While for Sigmund Freud the uncanny helps to reveal repressed complexes from early childhood, the Surrealists saw in it the potential to lead to alternative realities of aesthetic and ideological relevance.



Doma

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Contemporary character design is perhaps a new confrontation with the uncanny. Often enough, characters are not a means to frighten and evoke horror, but they are subjected to violence, evil and torture, as in the work of Don Hertzfeldt (USA). We laugh at the characters and at the same time feel haunted by the transgressive actions to which they play victim. Possibly, the uncanny is closely linked to the absence of a body, making it possible to transcend the logic of life and death.

## Communication

Being so visually pared-down, characters are highly effective in the media-driven world. Their global dissemination owes much to the Internet, which imposes its own technical limitations on the design. From the perspective of media theory, characters are the inscription of the medium Internet. And their message is that of the Internet itself: the phantasm of global contact and communication. Eboy's (GER) strategy of digitalising the world pixel by pixel might be interpreted along these lines.

But the impact of character design is not limited to digital media. From a broader point of view, character design is a contemporary graphical language. It functions as a thesaurus for the transmission of meaning beyond alphabetical syntax. Similar to the logic of the logo, character design operates through abstraction, metaphoric density and a play with visiotypes. In this way, characters reach adults and children alike, breeding their own audience in the phenomena of "kidult" – the generation that refuses to grow up. Instead of just "kitsch", character design can be a form of resistance to a visual culture flooded by images of sex and violence. See Yoshitomo Nara's (JP) angry and Chiho Aoshima (JP) hyper-romantic girls.

## Further Topics

Other theoretical dimensions in character design are cultural and regional differences, the history of pared-down character design before the year 2000, the monstrous, and gender or subjectivity. In general, we are looking for papers that reflect a broader view rather than which focus on a specific context of one character, style or artist.

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Sketch for "Billy's Balloon", Don Hertzfeldt



Eboy



Yoshitomo Nara



Chiho Aoshima

## ***Submission Guidelines, Conference Format and Publication***

All proposals should be submitted via email by July 31st, 2006. They should be in English or German and not longer than two pages. We will contact you in the month of August, whether or not we would like you to develop a longer essay.

The chosen submissions will be a contribution to the 2nd Pictoplasma Conference, taking place from October 11-14th at the Haus der Berliner Festspiele in Berlin. The conference focuses on the presentations of artists and designers. Additionally, we will stage panel discussions and theoretical talks, in which we would like to invite you to participate. All chosen results of the submissions and discussions will be published in a volume in 2007.

## ***Contact***

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## ***Further Reading***

- Jean Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, Paris 1976; dtsch: *Der symbolische Tausch und der Tod*; engl: *Symbolic Exchange and Death*
- Hans Belting, "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology", in: *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Winter 2005), pp. 302-319; dtsch: *Bild-Anthropologie*, München 2001
- Hans Belting, *Aus dem Schatten des Todes. Bild und Körper in den Anfängen*, München 1996
- Stephan Berg, *Uncanny Presence*, in: *Katalog zur Ausstellung "Night Sites"*, Kunstverein Hannover, 26.11.2005 - 5.2.2006. Extract: [www.kunstverein-hannover.de/katalog/650\\_Berg.pdf](http://www.kunstverein-hannover.de/katalog/650_Berg.pdf)
- Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: La logique de la sensation*, 1994; dtsch: *Francis Bacon, Logik der Sensation*; engl: *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*
- George Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, Paris 1992; dtsch: *Das was wir sehen, blickt uns an*, München 1999
- Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, London 1993
- Sigmund Freud, "Das Unheimliche" (1919), in: *Freud, Gesammelte Werke*, 32 vols (London, 1940-52), XII: *Werke aus den Jahren 1917-1920*, pp. 229-68.  
English translation available at [www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~amtower/uncanny.html](http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~amtower/uncanny.html)
- Takashi Murakami, *Superflat*, Tokyo 2000
- Takashi Murakami, *Little Boy. The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, New York 2005
- Sianne Ngai, *The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde*, in: *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Summer 2005), pp. 811-847
- Sigrid Schade, *The Media/Games of the Doll. Contemporary Artists' Interest in Surrealism*, [www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/cyborg\\_bodies/doll\\_bodies/](http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/cyborg_bodies/doll_bodies/)
- Peter Thaler, *Pictoplasma*, with essays by Olaf Nicolai and François Chalet, Berlin 2001
- Peter Thaler, *Pictoplasma 2*, with essays by Takashi Murakami and Phil Hunt, Berlin 2003
- Peter Thaler and Lars Denicke, *Pictoplasma – Characters in Motion*, Berlin 2005

For visual inspiration, please visit our website [www.pictoplasma.com](http://www.pictoplasma.com)