

Remembering Michael Erlhoff

Tom Bieling

Tomorrow will be the first anniversary of Michael Erlhoff's passing. 364 days hardly went by without him being present in some way. Michael was an inspirational figure for many of us, who exemplified much of what is important in research and design with his numerous publications, teaching, lectures, initiatives and actions, and not least with his critical but always optimistic, positive mind.

One of the last projects we did together, was the preparation of the NERD conference for New Experimental Research in Design 2021. Especially when it comes to the question of "Experimental" in (not only design) research, Michael always reminded us to understand it as an experience-based emancipation from any beliefs, from the "misconception of assuming that we live in a harmonious world [governed by mathematical rules]". He taught us to be aware of the necessity to take risks, of interventions and of somersaults in order to gain something like insights into what is happening and why it is happening.



Figure 1 Michael Erlhoff © Paul Gisbrecht

In their broad topical range, our NERD speakers brought us closer to what Erlhoff had constantly proclaimed further on: "The advanced quality of experimentation is based on the fact that experimentation always changes situations, correlations, and conditions. Experimentation never takes anything as a given fact, rather anything is open to change. That is: experimentation is both confusing and normal. Experimentation does not accept that rules and regulations are fixed. And experimentation is able to see mistakes and misunderstandings as potential qualities for innovation and for developing new perspectives." (Erlhoff 2018, 8).

This is probably where the most significant difference between "pure" design practice and design-based research becomes clear. Where design is (critically) put into question and compared or also brought together with existing theories, and not least defended or also transformed in a (trans-) disciplinary discourse.

In October 2022 we (at BIRD) will conduct the next NERD conference. Without Michael, and yet with him. And one thing will be sure: each of the papers presented and discussed will illustrate perfectly what Michael used to say: "Design only becomes research when there is a dialogue between making and thinking, when knowledge is gained and also communicated in a plausible, comprehensible way."

We have gained so much knowledge from you, and you have always communicated it plausibly and convincingly, too! Thank you, dear Michael Erlhoff!

Tom Bieling, April 2022

Literature

Erlhoff, Michael & Wolfgang Jonas (Eds.) (2018): NERD – New Experimental Research in Design: Positions and Perspectives (Board of International Research in Design). Basel: Birkhäuser.

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Citation Information:

Bieling, Tom (2022): Remembering Michael Erlhoff. DESIGNABILITIES Design Research Journal, (04) 2022. ISSN 2511-6274 www.designforschung.org