

INTERVIEW: **STEFAN DIEZ**

Put simply, **STEFAN DIEZ** is incredible. Not only does he ooze charisma and tell stories that go on crazy tangents and then loop around to profound words of wisdom, he's also extremely honest and genuine. Even though I've never met Stefan in person, as we talked over Skype I felt like I'd just been invited to a dinner party at his place and we were speaking as two friends do, sharing stories and laughing about life's many complexities. Stefan is one of the worlds most influential and innovative product designers with a portfolio that speaks for itself. From his studio/home/castle in the center of Munich, Stefan speaks with Drop about family, the people who have shaped his world and why investing in design is vital.



You're on holidays soon. Are you going away?

Yeah, we're going to a small island off the coast of Napoli called La Pro-cida with the kids for two weeks. It's a really small place in the south of Italy. There's a night train we can take from Munich so I think it's going to be a pretty easy ride.

Have you guys been to La Procida before?

No, but Italy is quite a familiar place for me, when we were children we'd go there almost every year. My parents have a house just between Florence and Rome. After La Proci-da I'm going to have a week in the studio where I'll be alone and have time to prepare everything for next season. I love this time of the year, everything hasn't really started yet but it's about to. Anyway, I find it difficult to do nothing for long periods of time so I think it's going to be perfect.

And you?

Work. Busy.

Have you been to Europe before?

Yeah I went four or five years ago to Paris, Barcelona and Berlin.

Ah okay, so you just got a rough overview of european city culture? (Laughs) Europe's actually quite amazing when you compare all these different cultures that exist in relatively a small place.



Yeah absolutely. I want to try and get back next year at some point.

Then you're definitely coming to Munich right? Your hooked up with Mirko (Borsche) now, how did you meet him?

I just emailed Mirko around six months ago and told him about the print edition we wanted to do and that we really wanted to work with his studio. It stemmed from that.

Ah okay, where did you find out about Mirko?

I studied graphic design at univer-sity so I always had Mirko's work in my reference folders.

I think that's a good idea, ha-ving Mirko in a reference folder (Laughs). The nice thing about Mirko is he's a such curious guy and if he sees potential in a collaboration where things can be explored that might be new or unexpected he's the guy to go for it. You guys worked together in 2008 yeah?

Yeah, we've known each other for quite a while though so we constantly meet up and every once in a while we work on a project together. We're actually working on

an upcoming project in 2017. We're doing a rather large exhibition on our studio's work at a museum in Germany.

That's fantastic.

Yeah it's really nice. A very good space, good timing and a good location.

It sounds exciting.

Yeah, the process has just started but I think it's going to be extre-mely interesting. With a project like this you have to give it enough time to really develop its many fa-

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cets in order to fully grasp what's possible and see where you can push the borders.

Mirko's worked on some of Saskia's projects also.

Yeah, he did her first look book's and they've been collaborating ever since.

They're great.

Absolutely.

So, tell me about where you grew up.

In a small place just out of Munich called Freising, very close to where there airport is but at the time the airport was not there.

What was it like growing up there?

It was a mixture between growing up in the countryside and being very close to – for German stan-dards – quite a metropolitan city. It was a very natural environment and I had two parents who both worked in a craftsman workshop. They were entrepreneurs.

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So it was a creative place to grow up?

My father's workshop was my childhood playground. He was a man who tried to make things possible and go beyond the usual expectations. Normally if you go to a carpenter they create something made from wood. When architects went to my father he didn't just take into consideration one ma-terial, he'd find a solution in metal if wood was not suitable. He col-laborated with architects to make interior design possible. It was quite cool because he was so clear about his position in the universe. He was a facilitator of sorts and helped others to find solutions.

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A lot of things that have changed since my father had his workshop and his education was also quite different to mine. I was given the chance to be both a facilitator and a designer. My father grew up like a typical child born during the war. His father was killed in Prussia so his early years were dominated by that event. When he was in high school his mother inherited



the workshop because all the men had been killed, so he pretty much had to step out on his own and begin a cabinet making education. Coming from this background I think he did a fantastic job when it was time for me to find my own direction. I had the choice to either become a cabinet maker and take over my father’s workshop or study architecture. I decided that first I’d complete a course in cabinet making. Afterwards I wanted to study architecture but before I began the course I learned about another, more universal profession called design. It was less space oriented and more object oriented which I found quite interesting. I studied industrial design at the State Academy of Art and Design in Stuttgart and had Richard Sapper as a professor which was amazing. I was never aware of how incredibly lucky I was to have such a fantastic educational foundation, it’s like when children think that what they have around them is just the norm and everybody else has it too.

You only find out these things later.

Much later. I still don’t think that one should be proud about something that’s just been luck though. One of the most important things in life is to do the best with the possibilities you’re presented. — Did I lose the thread? (Laughs) I think I got lost...

(Laughs) That’s okay, it’s interesting. On the topic of father’s though, you have three children now. What do you love about being a father?

When you decide to become a father, or when I decided, I never had a clear idea of what it meant. I had a very good concept of childhood from my parents so I must say, becoming a father was never something I thought of as being difficult or something I should think long and hard about. The kids see what Saskia and I are doing and they learn the way we do things in life. One day they’re going to leave home and create their own story.

We don’t believe in forcing them into any courses because it’s im-



portant they know that everything is available to them, they can just reach out and take it. This concept of motivation is a critical one, if you want somebody to do something you probably shouldn’t tell them to do it, they have to find things out for themselves. Finding the right way of motivating people is probably the most difficult thing when it comes to education.

Yeah absolutely. So who are some people that have really shaped the way you see this world and have motivated you?

One I have already talked about, my father. When I was seven years old I

was already a frequent guest in the workshop and of course with all the tools and machines it was sometimes quite dangerous. One day I almost cut off my hand, I was playing with a machine and I got dragged into it. There was a sharp edge on the casing of the conveyor machine and it was cutting around my hand, quite a deep cut. Instead of being totally shocked though I was quick enough to switch the machine into the reverse mode, so my hand was pulled out again before it was totally cut off (Laughs).

Wow.

Some of the workers saw it hap-

pen so they lifted me up and took me into the office where my mum almost dropped dead from fright. My father was super cool though and just said, «It’s okay, your arm is still on, let’s slowly move towards a doctor.» Later on he shouted at the guy who’d carried me into the office. «It was unnecessary to create such a drama!» he said (Laughs). This kind of coolness is something that I definitely got from my father. Later on of course there was Richard Sapper and what I learned from him is how much an aesthetic is also linked to a mechanical principle. There’s a logic to design and a logic to beauty and it’s all connected. The ingredients he used in his studio were so profound and employed various disciplines. He was proficient with electronics, he was proficient with materials, he was proficient with mechanics and he allowed all this knowledge to flow into an object. That made me aware of how much potential there is if you are broad minded. You can probably see that the way we work now makes use of a deep interest in very different fields of life and technical materials. Another very important person is Konstantin Grcic who I worked with for almost three years. I was his assistant and it was a very intimate relationship in a small office, there was only the two of us and sometimes an intern. Konstantin was one of the first new generation designers like Sebastian Bergne or Matthew Hilton, who had created their own studios.



They weren't agency based designers or working for big companies, like Dieter Rams for instance. They were the new designers who had their own language, their own opinions and were collaborating within the industry. Anyway, it was a great way to learn about what was going on at that moment in time and I met and spoke with lot of interesting people. It encouraged me to find my own way.

Collaboration seems to have played an intrinsic role in your work. What are your thoughts on the importance of creating with others?

Well, the biggest motivation for collaborating lies in the fact that it's a door that leads to being able to deeply explore a field that you are not an expert in. For instance, we collaborate with engineers and companies who work with a specific material or technique and I try to establish a friendship with these people. I feel this is what is so special about our time, we're able to network much better than before.

Not only can we easily communicate to Australia over Skype, we can also send pictures, files, parcels, samples. With this possibility to send a shape or sketch around the world we've really increased the potential enormously and that's where I think our generation of designers can grasp a new feeling of confidence. Sources are more accessible and the work is becoming increasingly shared.

Open source furniture for example.

Yeah, the boundaries have become quite blurred. There are a lot of disadvantages too though because the picture is not clear anymore, everything is mixing into each other. I could tell you a two hour story about this (Laughs) but i'll make it short. We designers can now be the ones to create a sharper picture within a relatively blurred universe and help to create an awareness by pulling on a lot of threads. The treasure box no longer exists in factories,

it lies with individuals now and if a designer is linking up with a good company that has a clear message and stands for something, like HAY for instance, then there is potential for a great partnership.

Yeah, a friend of mine also brought up open source furniture in conversation last night, which you wrote an article about last year. At one point you mention the trap of post industrial production and its possible implications, one being a return to traditional handcrafted production methods. Do you think that we might be on the brink of that eventuality?

Yeah there's a risk. The article I wrote was about the fact that using CNC machines is not forcing the industry to invest in design anymore. If you don't invest in something then you probably aren't very committed to the idea. I think the critical discussion at the moment is about the remittance of intellectual property. There is an investment that has to be made in an industrial

design process. If one has to sit and engineer it, someone also has to sit and design it and if an object is produced on CNC machines, which creates functional objects but in very small numbers, then this cannot be payed back in royalties or licensing fees. I see it happening in many design studios, including our own.

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You need a long term solution.

Yes exactly. You need a solution


that is long term and has investment. If you expect a really good solution then designers have to invest time and energy into it and for this to happen the partner also needs to invest equally. Either in terms of facilitating machinery or in terms of financial compensation. Without this you are potentially creating a dead end for design. One solution though is the designers becoming producers, like Saskia. She doesn't rely on royalties, she's living off the sales. The turnover of her shop is quite respectable but if she was to try and live off only 3% of that, she would not survive.

Yeah it's a complicated problem. So... I wanted to ask you about balance - which is always a hard

thing to achieve when you run your own studio - but when you do have some spare time, how do you like to unwind?

(Laughs) I buy myself a newspaper and sit under the tree in the sun, simple. I also like good food, good drink and good conversation. It's very basic, I'm not really a holiday guy.





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What's been your proudest moment to date?

Well recently I would say the Orga-tec exhibition that we did for New Order. HAY gave us the opportunity to create a huge fair stand and present a project that we designed. I thought we were totally overdoing and Rolf (Hay) would be happy with forty percent of it, but he went for a hundred and ten percent. That was a really proud moment, I was happy.

That's when you know you've got a great relationship with the client.

Absolutely.

Do you have any personal goals that you have not have achieved as of yet?

Yeah to be honest there's a lot. Design wise we are slowly moving into lighting more and more, which is certainly very interesting because technology has changed so much and there's still lots to explore. There are also going to be a lot of changes at the studio soon because we are in a position where we have to search for new boundaries, we've already achieved so much and now the studio is growing up. I don't know what it's going to bring but I feel it will be important to make good decisions.

That's exciting. So a bit off topic, but how did you and Saskia meet?

I first saw her in Frankfurt on a fair stand actually. Not very romantic (Laughs). She was a design student interning in an office. I was just

saying hello to a designer I knew named Christian Haas and was quickly introduced to her, later on we met in Munich with Christian because he had an exhibition there. We had a longer conversation and that's how it developed. It was a very beautiful period because Saskia and I were working together a lot on our first Rosenthal project, cutlery and porcelain. I loved working with her. The concept of a day passing by, sitting in a studio and creating something together was something I thought was very valuable, it reminded me a lot of my childhood. You always fall back into these patterns that you know. I thought «Ah, wow! This is something that feels very familiar.»

Do you work together in the same space currently?

Yeah her showroom is on the street, front row so to say. My studio is in the backyard, it's all in the same building where her store is.

Do you live close by?

Munich center, three floors up from the store. We feel like we're living in a castle.

In what ways do you influence each other creatively?

We ask each other's opinion. I tell her what we're doing and I ask her what she thinks about it and then I get an honest answer, and she does the same. Pretty cool I think. You don't get an honest answer from a lot of people generally.

What are your dreams for the future?

What would be great is to have some time to contemplate. A reflecting phase. I think we're going to get the opportunity to do that with the exhibition in Cologne. The moment you have to explain your thoughts you're in a position to reflect and it's something I'd really like to take the chance to do.

What kind of legacy would you like to leave?

Wow! Such a heavy question (Laughs)... I think all I can do is be an authentic model of myself instead of a facade. I want to live in an authentic way which makes

sense to others and to the children Saskia and I have together. We're often asked «How do you manage? You are both working, both offices are running well and you have three children.» For many it's a dream and it would be great if our way of life could be shared somehow. The reason it's possible is because of the attitudes we have.

That's really nice. Thank you Stefan.