

Touched by Water

THE 2011 HANSGROHE WATER SYMPOSIUM



hansgrohe

Water Works

MARKUS HEINSDORFF

Installation artist Markus Heinsdorff from Munich agreed to hold a workshop to offer insight into the way he works. The end result would be a short film in which water would take center stage. The only technical aid used was a video camera. Everything else developed spontaneously by exploring the area around the Hansgrohe plant in Schiltach.

For many years, Markus Heinsdorff has dedicated himself to water and the sensual and aesthetic impressions it affords us. His interest in creating art with water developed very early in his professional career. He has produced a wide range of artwork, including installations, objects and photographs, and mixed media work. His deep involvement with water arises from knowing that water is one of the most pressing issues of our times – which is why he seeks to bring people into intense contact with water through his work.

And yet, Heinsdorff himself always finds something new in water: “If you look at water surfaces from a certain angle, you discover an array of fascinating light reflections that, depending on the position of the sun, gleam in a complex blend of colors and sometimes look like codes from another world.” In his photographs, Heinsdorff captures the endless shapes and colors generated by the movement of water and the reflection of light, their development and their perpetual state of change. The results often look like paintings, and reality and abstraction are almost indistinguishable – a fascinating phenomenon with different effects, depending on whether the water is fresh water or seawater, or from a river or a lake.



In the workshop, Heinsdorff made use of the versatility and diversity of these water reflections. The basic idea was to make a short film, a composition of image and sound, and then show it at the plenary of the symposium. In the process, workshop participants would perceive water from unfamiliar perspectives and reacquaint themselves with the element in an entirely new way. At the same time they would be involved as creative actors in the making of a piece of art.

The Kinzig in Schiltach is a small river in the Black Forest, rather unspectacular in its dimensions or even in its course. Yet under Markus Heinsdorff’s direction, participants discovered an amazing variety of scenic features and numerous possibilities for filming them. Within a stretch of barely 500 meters they found deep waters, glistening reflections, foaming swirls, tumbling rapids, a sandy river bed, algae, and much more. Everyone was invited to take turns filming, while the artist commented on his vision of the river: “Wherever I look, the pattern on the water’s surface is never the same: wind, current, refraction of light and depth are continually creating new imagery – the whole river is a patchwork.”

But Markus Heinsdorff would not be an installation artist if he limited himself only to the filming of a river. He is also creative, and his creations allow water to become a stage for conveying other messages. At the point where the Schiltach and Kinzig rivers meet and generate rather turbulent swirls and eddies, he released variously sized balls into the water, some lighter, some heavier – ping pong balls, foam rubber balls, footballs – and left them to the free play of forces. They made visible otherwise hidden countercurrents, undercurrents and vortices, and revealed the willful nature of water.

Markus Heinsdorff is not just interested in images, he also documents the sounds water makes. He collected pebbles in the Schiltach from the riverbed near the banks and placed them in glass bowls with water. While he swirled the bowls in his hands, he called participants’ attention to the swooshing and tinkling sounds the pebbles made in the water. Heinsdorff also talked about other harmonious water sounds such as those made in Chinese bronze vessels. He said that essentially every river has its own unique sound.

A final experiment showed how multifaceted water symbolism is. The artist asked participants to use wet sponges to write on dry asphalt the names we use for water: H₂O or aqua, for instance. On hot days, this kind of water writing evaporates quickly, showing how transient these appearances are. But this did not happen on this cool October day. So in the finished film, Markus Heinsdorff let the water writing process run backwards, and we saw the wet sponges absorb the wet characters from the asphalt, making them disappear after all. The workshop and the film that came out of it offered just a brief glimpse of Markus Heinsdorff’s unique way of working and thinking. For many years, he has worked intensely with the subject of water and its life-giving and destructive forces. “*Wasser-Werke*” (Water Works), exhibited in 2009 at the Kallmann Museum in Munich, gave the public an excellent opportunity to discover his work. Heinsdorff had salvaged from a river a tree trunk measuring 18 meters in length; this was placed in front of the museum. Its form was the outcome of the river water’s many years of work. To set a contrast, he presented smaller, blackened pieces of driftwood on a large light table, making them look like works of calligraphy.



Water has long played an important role in Markus Heinsdorff's work: "Sky Place", bamboo installation, Bali, 2002.

Since then he has worked together with several partners, among them the hydromechanics laboratory at the Technical University of Munich, where he created his installation "Air Rings Underwater". Dolphins at play have been observed to blow bubble rings similar to smoke rings. This gave Heinsdorff the idea to construct a bubble ring generator in the hydromechanics laboratory. A plastic replica of a huge fish mouth was built into the bottom of a transparent acrylic glass tube filled with water (2.4 meters high and 65 centimeters in diameter). The electronically controlled opening and closing of the fish mouth generates doughnut-shaped bubble rings, 30 centimeters in diameter and 5 centimeters high, that slowly rise to the surface where they practically explode. The rings also rotate inwardly and sparkle with multiple reflections, revealing a spectacle never seen before in this way.

Heinsdorff had already created an equally astonishing construction in 2000, "Skyplace", a large sculpture on the Indonesian island of Bali. In a flooded, artificial paddy, he managed to build an enormous bamboo airship on stilts, 30 meters in length and nearly 6 meters across. Visitors could walk on a footbridge inside the open, airy bamboo construction and see themselves reflected, along with the sky and parts of the airship, down in the water below them. When rice started to grow, the mirror turned into a green field, and once the rice harvest was over, the field turned back into a mirror – symbolically representing landing and flight, depending on whether there was a harvest or a flood. This experience roused Heinsdorff's interest in creating new forms and space with nature. As with the airship, the combination of water and air often plays an important role.



By observing the river, filming and transforming it, we can become more closely acquainted with water's intrinsic nature.

Playful art: preparing a scene for the short water film.

His sound installations are also inspired in many ways by water. In one of them he places large water-filled demijohns (glass balloons) on steel stands in a circle and connects them using a ring made of copper tubing. A partial vacuum causes water to steadily drip onto metal sound cans of different sizes placed in the center of buckets below. Sounds are created by water drops bouncing off the cans, which act as resonating bodies and generate high and low tones depending on their size. The sound of water falling on metal is reminiscent of church bells. Drops fall from a height of up to several meters and produce tones of astonishing intensity and volume.

Markus Heinsdorff was an international artist even before he created the "Skyplace" in Bali. For many years now he has been a visiting art professor at various universities in China and he designed the German-Chinese Pavilion made of bamboo for EXPO 2010 in Shanghai. He searches for ways to address the subject of water and nature through new and surprising perspectives, and is currently working on a project called "Art and Research", an exhibition of objects similar to the water bubble ring copied from dolphins. The exhibition will be launched in Germany and travel to different countries. Its scope will cover regional and global water issues, and it will be individually adapted to each country. The exhibition will also address current topics in local excursions, lectures and workshops. Heinsdorff is not interested in static art. He is interested in thought-provoking ideas, in awareness and in expressions of change – because change, after all, is inherent to the very nature of water.

