

Eike König

HORT have made a name for themselves by producing constantly exciting and surprising communication solutions. We caught up with founder, ex-gymnast and school drop out Eike König to find out how he keeps things ticking over in their new Berlin studio, and when he plans to take up Yoga.



Good morning Eike, HORT is now fifteen years old, that's quite an achievement. What were you doing when you were 15? I was a gymnast! **Really?** Yeah, I started doing sport when I was three, I did every discipline. I was best at the horizontal bar and it was my life, I used to go the gym five times a week. **Do you think what you were doing in the gym helped inform the rest of what you were up to at school?** My team was my life. School, sport, sleep. I think I learnt a lot about discipline, fear, power and failure but in school I was bad, I couldn't handle to be in a system that does not allow me to be who I am and I got kicked out. It's funny, we just did a workshop last week with six of the creative heads from a big design studio and most of them had the same story, they got kicked out or were bad in school. **Do you think there's something in creative people that likes to rebel? Or is it just chance?** I think to move forward you need to be a bit of a rebel. **Are you still rebelling with HORT?** You have to question things, but no, I'm not rebelling anymore. **Does that mean you've stopped going forward or progressing?** Ha - you got me. When I set up the studio in Frankfurt, I used to say "fuck the client". I was born there, grew up there, got my friends and family there. These were the old days. I quit university right before my graduation because it sucked and a record label offered me to run the art department. Music was a big part of my life, so I saw it as my chance to break out and do something different. **What kind of music were you listening to?** I started with heavy metal, then became a new wave guy, went over to EBM [Electronic Body Music] and electro. Now I listen to all kinds of music but I still love rock. I listen to bands like Ween, Clutch and McLusky. **Why did you move to Berlin, what's wrong with Frankfurt?** Nothing's wrong with my city. We have a football team, we have a river, we have sun and rain but there had been some private things that started making me think about whether I should stay forever. It dawned on me that either I would die in one of the hospitals that I saw every day, or I could take the chance and move to somewhere else. I had never moved before, so at 39, it was quite a new thing for me. **Has the way you work changed since the move?** No! When we left Frankfurt it was a decision between Zurich and Berlin, I asked my people here at HORT, who are all younger than I am and they said BERLIN! It's a nice city and we found a great place here in Kreuzberg in an old tobacco factory. We have lots of space but the way we work hasn't changed. There's a lot going on in the city so I'm more often on the road, but there's also a big hype about Berlin that I don't believe in, there are no jobs for designers. It's cool for us, we work for other people internationally, so we don't need Berlin. I don't want to stay in Berlin forever, it's nice here, but I think I will move on in a couple of years. Now I've moved once, it's easier for me to move again, but anyway, who knows about the future? I don't think so much about tomorrow, I know that it can change in a second, so at the moment I'm concentrating on my work. Look at The Designer's Republic they were well known worldwide, but had to close down. Maybe when I lose my love of business I'll become a yoga man! **We'll look forward to seeing that! Do you think that's what Ian Anderson from The Designer's Republic is doing?!** Ha ha, no, he's not. I think he will open again with a new structure and a new strategy. I'm sure he still has far too much love for design to do yoga quite yet.

You describe the way you work as 'unconventional', what do you mean by that? Is that a new thing, or the way HORT has always worked? It's the way HORT has always worked. When I say 'unconventional' I mean that as a studio we want to come to the best solutions for our clients. I found out that we were working without leaving our comfort zone, we learn how to get good results but in turn, by learning, we become comfortable. Things that are running well you don't want to change, but this means you will always get the same results — so, the question is how do you step out of that circle? **Is that what you encourage others to do in your workshops?** This is a very important part of our working process and yes, this is what I want them to find out for themselves by doing our workshops. **What do HORT learn from doing the workshops, does it help you as much as it helps your clients?** We say that they should be playful. Some people think that this is childish, but for me it's my master plan. Play as much as possible, explore things, then look at the results with a professional eye and make decisions. So in answer to your question, sometimes yes, sometimes no. The way we work needs to have space, most clients do not have the structure we have. For them it's much harder to install a working process like we have in their own agency, so it opens their eyes. They learn that creativity could go a million different ways. **There are lots of you at HORT, and it seems like a very flexible set up. How do you keep quality control with your work, and what are you missing at HORT?** At HORT I am missing nothing. This is the place I was looking for when I was young. A place where you can learn and grow, where there is someone supporting you in the way you are, taking care of you. I never found it, so I opened it by myself. All of the people here are wonderful characters and they are allowed to stay the way they are, we have a very open structure. Most important is respect and the possibility to say something without worrying. I am the fighter in front, so internally everything is fine. We've grown a little bit too fast and I love these people here so I try to keep them close, but business is hard these days and we have to make sure that the costs are not killing us. The hardest thing is to get paid correctly for your work. People are losing interest in graphic design, clients think they can get ideas for free, desktop publishing became something everyone was able to do. Anyway, there's nearly no job we've done that I wouldn't show on our website. We are in this good position that clients are coming to us wanting us to work the way we work, I am open for everything I can build a relationship with. Recently we designed an interface, which we've never done before. Also at the moment we are designing an architectural sculpture in Berlin, we are not architects, but if I am interested we dive into it. At the same time clients think we are freaks, doing these things for Nike etc. and they maybe think we do what we want, but what you see is hard work, which is the result of big discussions with everyone. I always try to not realise the picture our client has in mind, we always try to develop something from the brief that is stronger and more complex. **Is there any project you wouldn't take on?** There's a lot I would not do. Most famously I turned down some work with a huge tobacco company. I smoke which is a bad thing and it's hard to stop, so I don't like the idea that a teenager might start smoking because of my packaging design. **Have you ever doubted your ability, or wanted to give up?** Sure, there was a moment when I was 27 and got my first burn out that I realised my abilities are limited, which is hard to accept. By finding this out I became free of fear and I started working with other people. I found out that I am a team player, everyone at HORT is adding their abilities and personalities to the group and that's how we become stronger.



HORT

You have a great intern policy at HORT and welcome lots of new faces into the studio. How did you gain the experience you needed to set up your own company? Were you welcomed in somewhere? I think I learnt it at the record company I was working for, they were like a big family, so I wanted to have a studio that had that kind of feeling. When I started my own business I worked alone, then started working with students like Achim and Marco from Vier5 in Paris and it became an open space where a lot of people were hanging out. I got my first employee, Ralf Hiemisch and we started accepting interns. For us it was important that we treated them with respect, giving them the opportunity to grow, and the chance to be on the same level as we are. I believe in these young people. I support them to develop a strong personality. I support them in going their own way. I support them when they say “no” and show me things that I don’t expect. I always tell my designers, “Surprise me, I trust in you”. From then on we got interns, always for six months and we’re still in contact with most of them, some are now even HORT crew members, like Tim and Tim who first came to us when they were 18 and 20 before going to university. They have worked with us ever since their internships. Tobias who is the same age, he is now 28 and has finished university, but always worked at HORT. I met them when they were very young and they learned a lot by working here — they have become great designers, thinkers, lovers, people. Now every week loads of people from around the globe ask for an internship at HORT. **How do you choose who to get in?** This is a big process. The first step is Lucie, my personal assistant, she gets in the portfolios and forwards the most exciting ones to me. I then review them and decide who to invite to an interview. For us it is very important to talk to the people in person. We want to show them who we are and we want to know who they are, so I take my time with the interviews. Often they last for two or three hours. It’s more about the person, the way they think and the way they see things, the work is one part, and second is the personality. We always take two interns at the same time, they sit together and we mix them up. They always come from different fields, one is usually more conceptual, the other more visual but by bringing them together they meet someone they would probably never have met in their life and it’s funny, most become good friends. The idea is that they learn from each other and we also make sure that they do at least one project together during their time at HORT. Today we are searching for people from different fields, like art, architecture and beyond. **This mentality is totally reflected in the way we’ve spoken today, as we’ve been chatting for a little while now and haven’t even really touched on any of your work. Is it possible to win a new client without even showing any work?** This is what I would love to do. We don’t normally do pitches. I think you have to find out by talking and sharing ideas if the person is the right one to work with. I always tell clients “I can show you our portfolio, but don’t search for ‘your’ solution in our work”. We like to develop something that is client specific, together with them. **Is the way you’ve decided to choose interns at HORT something you’ve developed consciously?** Look, it’s easy — I treat them the way I wanted to be treated. **Surely we’re just describing politeness, something that should be ingrained in all of us?** Sure, everything I do is a reflection of myself. I don’t want to work with people if they don’t respect me and my work. My work is something I am offering, with love and whatever, so people should respect that or leave. **We didn’t want to let you go without asking you why you have the red ‘HORT’ logo when you roll over all of the images on your website?** Why not? It’s part of our corporate design that Vier5 developed years ago, they designed the font for me. Maybe it’s saying, “Hey, this is HORT’s work. Copy, steal, whatever, but we did this”. A lot of people hate our website, but now the big designers in Germany are following the style a little. **What do you think of that? Is that a compliment to be copied?** I don’t care if it’s a compliment. This is the way we are and I think our website shows a lot of our personality, the way we speak, the way we show, the way we understand websites, the way we want people to flip through our work and maybe get lost... **Finally then, do any of your clients find you through your website?** Yes, some have, it’s good because we can send a filtered link to clients to match what they’re looking for... let’s hope they keep coming back.

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