

Towards a Critical Faculty

A short reader concerned with art/design education
compiled by Stuart Bailey
for the Academic Workshop
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Let me open this slightly odd document by introducing myself through my own art-educational background. I began as an undergraduate student of Typography & Graphic Communication in a rigorous but essentially maverick department at the University of Reading in the UK, then later as something between graduate and apprentice at the familial Werkplaats Typografie [Typography Workshop] in the provincial Netherlands. Since then I have worked across the arts, mainly as a book designer, co-founded and edited a design journal, *Dot Dot Dot*, which continues in an ever-widening cultural vein, and simultaneously taught in the undergraduate departments at both my old Reading course and in graphic design at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam. After a few years teaching, I recently came to a standstill where I found myself so confused about what and why I was teaching that it seemed better to stop and attempt to readdress the purpose before trying again. Around this time I also found myself involved in countless conversations with friends and colleagues in similar situations with similar feelings, marked less by disillusion and more by confusion. Then I ended up as some kind of wild card at Parsons' new-founded Academic Workshop, who were interested in directly addressing exactly these concerns. Which is how I come to be attempting to engage you in the process.

A first disclaimer: This document is a loose, fragmented reader designed to circle the area the Academic Workshop intends to discuss in subsequent forums, both inside and outside the context of The New School. Because the topic is so broad and quickly overwhelming, it seems most useful by way of introduction to simply collect my own reflex compilation of others' viewpoints. This is a brief survey based on resources within easy reach and the result of a few months' worth of more or less focused conversations. As such it traces the process of mapping the lay of the land as a work-in-progress intended to be amended, added to, and refined through our impending conversations. One advantage of this approach is that it ought to remain timely.

A second disclaimer: The entire issue of art/design schooling is infuriatingly elliptical, and constantly in danger of cancelling itself out. This is, at least in part, because what we might initially perceive as separable issues (such as the distinctions between undergraduate and graduate, art and design, teaching and learning, mentor and facilitator, etc.) are all inextricably intertwined. Once one is addressed, one or more of the others immediately come into play. This is why the present document is not particularly subdivided—even its basic chronological divisions barely hold.

Artists and designers (or good ones) are by nature reflexive creatures—they simultaneously reflect on what they do while doing it. As I understand it, this Workshop was set up simply with an aim to harnessing this towards a practical end: *to engage its design faculty to actively design the institution*, a logic which seems as paradoxically absent as it is obvious in contemporary art/design schools. So, cutting through a few anticipated responses: this is not a rooting-out exercise, nor a preamble to a series of job losses (probably

the opposite), nor a change for the sake of change, nor some infant generation staking a claim, nor a gratuitous cosmetic exercise in spending excess money, nor a hollow PR campaign. It simply proposes the time, space and energy to ask the sorts of questions that should be permanently addressed as a matter of course, with the school set up to accommodate them as and when necessary. In short, to engage our “design thinking” towards consolidating the future curriculum. If there is one principal obstruction to such constructive hopes it lies in the disjunct between the academic and financial-bureaucratic divisions of contemporary schools—between projected/imagined ideas and reality. There is no good reason why the two cannot be resolved together in a curriculum plan at once transparent, open and clear.

There are, of course, countless routes into thinking about teaching contemporary art/design students. Mine is to try to get to the bottom of a term just mentioned above, and which is constantly floating around the Workshop: “design thinking.” First by questioning the meaning of the phrase itself—which is perhaps the first clue to my particular background and approach: “design thinking,” to my mind, is a tautology, i.e. “designing” is synonymous with “thinking.” (According to the dictionary: “to conceive or fashion in the mind.”) At the same time, I understand the implication: “design thinking”—and more or less interchangeably, “intelligence” or “expertise”—is an attempt to define the constituent parts of an abstract process distinct from those of other fields such as “craft thinking,” “scientific thinking” or “philosophical thinking.” The key characteristic of “design thinking” might reasonably be defined as “reflection-in-action,” which Norman Potter further elucidates in his statement:

Design is a field of concern, response, and enquiry as often as decision and consequence.
(Potter, 1989)

The perceived payoff of unpacking “design thinking” is that its constituent qualities can be identified and extracted to provide the new focus of a contemporary art/design curriculum. This follows from what I believe is a common intuition that the existing model no longer reasonably accommodates contemporary requirements with regard to the ever-blurring boundaries of art/design disciplines, of specialism giving way to generalism, that “design thinking” is transferable (or “exportable”) across disciplines, and that as such, students ought to be pushed accordingly towards developing a general reflexive critical faculty rather than discipline-specific skills.

Here I propose to consider the pedagogical application of “design thinking” as a working hypothesis *through my own form of design thinking* (“concern, response, and enquiry”). My method is to rewind, pause, then fast-forward: to map the historical trajectory of art/design education in order to identify how and why past models were set up in response to prevailing social conditions, then to try and articulate why, in the light of these legacies, combined with an overview of descriptions of the contemporary paradigm, “design thinking” might indeed be an appropriate foundation for the future.

Who really *can* face the future? All you can do is project from the past, even when the past shows that such projections are often wrong. And who really can forget the past? What else is there to know? What sort of future is coming up from behind I don't really know. But the past, spread out ahead, dominates everything in sight.
(Pirsig, 1974)

Past

What are the key models of art/design schools? Let's try to compile a lineage, beginning around a hundred years ago from the point at which art and design schools began to be set up as distinct entities following the first industrial revolution, in a context of duality between the traditional master-apprentice model for craft-based professions (e.g. metallurgy, carpentry, etc.) and the academy-studio for fine art training (drawing, painting, etc.)

The School of Arts and Crafts was set up in 1896 to fill "certain unoccupied spaces in the field of education." The foundation of the School represented an important extension of the design philosophy of the Arts and Crafts movement which, largely inspired by William Morris, had raised the alarm against the lowering of standards as a result of the mechanization of design processes. Advocating a return to hand-production, this movement argued that the machine was a social evil. The School's first principal, believed that "science and modern industry have given the artist many new opportunities" and that "modern civilization rests on machinery and that no system for the encouragement or endowment of the arts can be sound that does not recognize this."

The School proved to be innovatory in both its educational objectives and its teaching methods. "The special object of the School is to encourage the industrial application of decorative design, and it is intended that every opportunity should be given for pupils to study this in relation to their own particular craft. There is no intention that the school should supplant apprenticeship; it is rather intended that it should supplement it by enabling its students to learn design and those branches of their craft which, owing to the sub-division of the processes of production, they are unable to learn in the workshop."

The majority of the staff of the school were not "certificated," full-time teachers; rather were they successful practitioners in their respective crafts, employed on a part-time basis, and providing the school with a great variety of practical skills and invaluable contacts with the professional world of the designer and craftsman. These pioneering innovations in objective and method proved to be crucial to a philosophy of art and design education which fashioned the establishment and development of many similar institutions in Britain and abroad, including the Weimar Bauhaus. (Central School prospectus, London, 1978)

In describing this office and project to other people, I invariably find myself back at the Bauhaus, simply because it remains the most explicit representation of a set of coherent principles and marker of a clear paradigm shift, namely, the change from the traditional master-apprentice to the group-workshop model; the introduction of the foundation course of general principles for all disciplines; the application of fine art to practical ends; and the synthesis of the arts around one particular vision. Whether these ideas were actually realized or even consistent is irrelevant here—again, they are listed because they are what the Bauhaus generally *represents*.

Workshops, not studios, were to provide the basis for Bauhaus teaching. Workshop training was already an important element in the courses offered by several "reformed" schools of arts and crafts elsewhere in Germany, but what was to make the Bauhaus different from anything previously attempted was a tandem system of

workshop-teaching. Apprentices were to be instructed not only by 'masters' of each particular craft but also by fine artists. The former would teach method and technique, while the latter, working in close cooperation with the craftsmen, would introduce the students to the mysteries of creativity and help them achieve a formal language of their own. (Whitford, 1984)

From here we might then ask: Are art schools in the 21st century still based on the Bauhaus model? If so, is this still relevant almost a century later? If not, on what other model(s) are they based, if at all? If not based on a model, how are they designed? and finally: Whether based on a model or not, should they be?

The old art schools were unable to produce this unity; and how, indeed, should they have done so, since art cannot be taught? Schools must be absorbed by the workshop again.

Our impoverished State has scarcely any funds for cultural purposes any more, and is unable to take care of those who only want to occupy themselves by indulging some minor talent. I foresee that a whole group of you will unfortunately soon be forced by necessity to take up jobs to earn money, and the only ones who will remain faithful to art will be those prepared to go hungry for it while material opportunities are being reduced, intellectual possibilities have already enormously multiplied. (Gropius, 1919)

And really, following the various incarnations of the Bauhaus (and the couple of postwar offshoots in Chicago and Ulm) any sense of an explicit, shared educational ideology tails off here, coinciding with the Second World War, and the end of what is generally regarded as the heroic phase of modernism.

I also once dreamed of a school where it would be natural to expect such an intermix of professions, arts and trades. There was some attempt in Lethaby's early ideas for the Central School of Arts & Crafts in London, in Henry van de Velde's and Gropius's Weimar Bauhaus-Hochschule fur Gestaltung, and at the Ulm Hochschule fur Gestaltung. The two latter did not survive: the Central transformed itself into a School of Art & Design, only distinguishable from many others by some still-surviving tradition, and, as always, everywhere, by occasional concatenations of firing staff & students.

All art schools, until some years ahead, have tried to teach what teachers taught, or else supplied an environment to expand. (And I can't think it very bad to give a human being three or four years of freedom to work out what consequence or nonsense his desires at eighteen/nineteen are; by "his" I include unisex "hers.") The question now is, not only the structure of art education, nor indeed the government reports, but, very strictly, what should we teach, what should they learn; also how can they be educated. There is no way to teach anything except through personal contact and conduct. There is no way to teach any person who lacks desire. There is no way to teach through excessive specialization in an "art" subject, with an iced-on gloss of general-liberal-complementary studies. Because the "subject" and its complement belong together. It should not prove impossible to give the "art" ones jobs ... (Froshaug, 1970)

Through the 1960s and 1970s—and on into postmodernity—the art/design school was increasingly characterized by the creation and popularization of its own image and social codes (bound up with the various facets of youth liberation, its

movements and nascent culture). This was school as liberal annex and breeding ground, but whose by-product was to accelerate the animosity towards the so-called Real World of business.

The art school has evolved through a repeated series of attempts to gear its practice to trade and industry to which the schools themselves have responded with a dogged insistence on spontaneity, on artistic autonomy, on the need for independence, on the power of the arbitrary gesture. Art as free practice versus art as a response to external demand: the state and the art market define the problem, the art school modernizes, individualizes, adds nuance to the solution.

Art school students are marginal, in class terms, because art, particularly fine art, is marginal in cultural terms. Constant attempts to reduce the marginality of art education, to make art and design more “responsive” and “vocational” by gearing them towards industry and commerce have confronted the ideology of “being an artist,” the romantic vision which is deeply embedded in the art school experience. Even as pop stars, art students celebrate the critical edge marginality allows, turning it into a sales technique, a source of celebrity. (Frith/Horne, 1987)

The following account was written by a student towards the end of this era, a typically convoluted attempt to deal with the contradictions of lingering socialist art and design ideals in the context of the hand-in-hand burgeoning of social liberation and commercialization:

I am trying to learn to be a designer. Designers are directly concerned with life. Designs are for living. Designing is just part of the process in which solar energy lives through the medium of hereditary information. Designers are concerned with information—information which furthers life. Being a designer is finding out ways of furthering life. Not thermodynamics/mechanics life, this is being a doctor, a servant purely. Emotion-communion life. How you check a design: does it make its user more alive? Or his children maybe? We have to work in time also.

Here is a problem for the designer, one to beat his head against. Clients usually ask him to operate the other way—against life—the clients I have come across. They ask him usually to make a design for part of a system for making a profit. Making a profit is life, sure, but for the client only. And it may be the client the designer is working for, but it is people he is working on. The client doesn't sit down and read all his 50,000 leaflets, people do. The client pays, but the designer must be ready to tear up his cheques if he or other people he loves don't or won't get the money, and if the client is trying to use him to channel life away from other people. The designer is working on people: he is working for people.

The designer may have to work for clients whose business is drainage of this kind. But not if he can survive without. If he has to, he must never forget what they are doing, and what they are doing to him, what they are asking him to do to other people. If he forgets this for a moment, they may start draining him. There must be people who are working for people. He can work for them. Then he will be a real designer, designing for life, not death.

How? I don't know yet, that's why I go to school, to experience, to share experience with those to whom these problems are no longer new and with those to whom their very newness is an opportunity for living. (Bridgman, 1969)

Present

—and this is the same writer forty years later:

We were wrong. That old article tells you why: rational design would only work for rational people, and such people do not exist. Real people have irrational needs, many of them to do with human tribalism. Though tribalism itself is rational—it increases your chances of survival—its totems are not. If you belong to the coal-effect tribe, you've got to have a coal-effect fire. There's no reason for wanting your heat source this shape, other than the fact that other tribe members do. There's no reason for having a modernist, post-modernist, minimalist or any other source of heat source, either, except as a similar totem. The reasons have to be tacked on later (but only if you are a member of the rationalist tribe—nobody else bothers).

So designers can't rule the world, they can only make it more like it already is. Fortunately (or unfortunately if you're a hard-line rationalist) the world is not any kind of coherent entity, so “like it already is” can mean many different things—just choose your tribe and go for it. This can give a satisfying illusion of control, despite the strict limits imposed by tribal convention. Because many tribes have novelty as one of their totems, it is possible to change—“redesign”—some of the other totems at regular intervals. Once confined to the clothing industry, this kind of programmed totemic change now extends to goods of all kinds: “fashion designers” have become just “designers.”

Such designers—the ones who design “designer” goods—have apparently achieved a measure of control over the wider public. It seems, according to one TV commercial I have seen, that they can even make people ashamed to be seen with the wrong mobile phone—a kind of shame that can only have meaning within a designer-led tribal context. The old, Marxist-centralist kind of designer didn't care whether people felt shame or anything else. He or she simply knew what was “best” in some absolute sense, and strove to make industry apply this wisdom. But “designer” designers work the other way around. Far from wanting to control their commercial masters, they enthusiastically share their belief that the public, because of its irrepressible tribal vanities, is there to be milked. They have capitulated in a way that my [previous] article fervently hoped they would not, but for the reason that is pointed out: in visual matters there is no “one best way.” Exploiting this uncertainty is what today's design business is all about. The old, idealistic modernism that I once espoused is on the scrap heap.

So my naive idea of the 1960s—that designers were part of the solution to the world's chaotic uncontrollability—was precisely the wrong way round. Today's designers have emerged from the back room of purist, centralist control to the brightly lit stage of public totem-shaping. Seen from the self-same Marxist viewpoint that I espoused in those ancient days, they are now visible as part of the problem, not the solution. They have overtly accepted their role as part of capitalism. Designers are now exposed, not as saviours of the planet but as an essential part of the global machinery of production and consumption. (Bridgman, 2002)

In line with the beginning of this text, Thierry de Duve has identified and calibrated some specific qualities of three

fundamental paradigms which *underly* models on which art school principles are defined. The ACADEMY, the BAUHAUS, and what I propose to simply call CONTEMPORARY.

The ACADEMY describes the period roughly up until the first world war, and therefore also pre-modernist. It is based on the underlying notion of the student possessing unique *talent* specific to a discipline. It is taught through the education of *technique*, in terms of a historical chain of development. Its method of teaching is by *imitation*, involving the reproduction of sameness towards continuity of the particular discipline.

The BAUHAUS, in comparison, describes the period roughly from the First World War on, which can be described as modernist in terms of coherently breaking with existing romantic or classical ways of working and thinking, and which—“more or less amended, more or less debased,” according to De Duve—has been the foundation of most art/design schools in existence today—“often subliminally, almost unconsciously.” It is based on the underlying notion of the student possessing general *creativity*, which spans disciplines. It is taught through the education of a *medium* as an autonomous entity, without emphasizing its lineage and continuity. Its method of teaching is by *invention*, involving the production of otherness and novelty and which, as such, emphasizes formalism.

The CONTEMPORARY describes the prevailing condition which, although *underlying* the art/design world as a paradigm different to those described above, has yet to yield a widespread collective change in the way its schools are constructed. In short, while these ideas are poured into the existing Bauhaus container, they no longer fit. A reasonable comparison with the above models, then, would suggest an underlying notion of the student possessing general *attitude*, which spans disciplines. It is taught through the education of a *practice* through which this attitude is articulated. Its method of teaching is by *deconstruction*, involving the analysis of a work’s constituent parts. Although this term seems particularly open to misinterpretation in light of its various common formal associations (particularly in Architecture) I propose to keep De Duve’s chart intact, while emphasizing that his “deconstruction” refers to intellectually unpacking, dismantling, and reading work.

ACADEMY	BAUHAUS	CONTEMPORARY
talent	creativity	attitude
technique	medium	practice
imitation	invention	deconstruction

The back-end of this period—bringing us roughly up to date—has been further marked and marred, of course, by the propagation of school as business, student as customer, and its attendant bureaucracy. All of which generates the ever-increasing gap between actual pedagogy and its marketed image.

Accreditation is an attempt to communicate to the world that we know and agree on what the truth is. But no school ever believes in the generic principles it must appear to endorse to be accredited. Those who draft these supposedly shared principles are not those known for their creativity or their knowledge of the history of the art they are trying to protect. Accreditation processes are universally discredited yet ever more intrusive. Kafka as the descendant of Vitruvius.
(Wigley, 2005)

This fraying of any coherent consensus or ideology since the Bauhaus—further confused by the tendency towards

decisions of school policy increasingly made by schools’ financial/bureaucratic divisions rather than academic ones—has resulted in a largely part-time generation of teaching staff lacking the opportunities (time, energy, resources, community, *encouragement*) to engage in theoretical or philosophical grounding—while (as far as I can see, from my own and colleagues’ experiences) *needing and wanting one*. Accepting all this as given, then, and zooming out of the specific focus on schools, how might we effectively summarize current social conditions directly related to art and design on which we might find a new protocol?

Alain Findeli outlines his take on the contemporary paradigm (“shared beliefs according to which our educational, political, technological, scientific, legal and social systems function”) as comprising 3 main characteristics: Materialism, Positivism, and Agnosticism. He then proceeds to list those tendencies which characterize the nature of a design culture under those preconditions:

The effect of product engineering and marketing on design, i.e., the determinism of instrumental reason, and central role of the economic factor as the almost exclusive evaluation criterion.

An extremely narrow philosophical anthropology which leads one to consider the user as a mere customer or, at best, as a human being framed by ergonomics and cognitive psychology.

An outdated implicit epistemology of design practice and intelligence, inherited from the nineteenth century.

An overemphasis upon the material product; an aesthetics based almost exclusively on material shapes and qualities.

A code of ethics originating in a culture of business contracts and agreements; a cosmology restricted to the marketplace.

A sense of history conditioned by the concept of material progress.

A sense of time limited to the cycles of fashion and technological innovations or obsolescence.

Having mapped these somewhat bleak circumstances, he then asks:

What could be an adequate purpose for the coming generations? Obviously, the environmental issue should be a central concern. But the current emphasis on the degradation of our biophysical environment tends to push another degradation into the background, that of the social and cultural environments, i.e. of the human condition.
(Findeli, 2001)

—and suggests that one key appropriate shift, already underway, is precisely that of *dematerialization*, away from a “product-centered attitude.” This would yield the end of the product-as-work-of-art, heroic gesture, genius mentality and fetishism of the artifact. It would be more interested in the human *context* of the design “problem” rather than the classical product description. It would emphasize the design of immaterial services (such as hospital or school bureaucracies) rather than material products. And finally, this “vanishing product” would be approbated on sustainable, ecological grounds, in reaction to current overproduction and planned obsolescence.

Let's counteract this material depression with the optimistic abstraction of Italo Calvino's set of lectures, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, a concise inventory of contemporary qualities and values which he proposed ought to be carried over the threshold of 2000 (written about 15 years in advance). These lectures directly referred to literature, specifically the continuing value of the novel, and as such consist primarily of examples drawn from a gamut of high-flown literary history from Lucretius to Perec. The qualities are, however, easily transferable across disciplines, and—significantly—the very gesture of transference to the context of this document is true to “design thinking” and at least three of Calvino's cherished qualities (lightness, quickness, and multiplicity).

To summarize, Calvino first cites LIGHTNESS, describing the necessity of the facility to “change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification.” He cites Kundera's conception of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in desirable opposition to the reality of *the ineluctable weight of living*, and draws a parallel with the two industrial revolutions, between the lightness of “bits” of information travelling along circuits and the heaviness of wrought iron machinery. The second quality, QUICKNESS, summarizes economy of expression, agility, mobility and ease. He quotes Galileo's notion that “discoursing is like coursing”—reasoning is like racing—and that “For him good thinking means quickness, agility in reason, economy in argument and [...] imaginative examples.” The third is EXACTITUDE, painted in opposition to the “plague afflicting language, revealing itself as a loss of cognition and immediacy, an automatism that tends to level out all expression into the most generic, anonymous and abstract formulas, to dilute meanings, to blunt the edge of expressiveness” While Calvino admits that precision and definition of intent are obvious qualities to propagate, he proposes that the contemporary ubiquity of language used in a random, approximate, careless manner, is extreme enough to warrant the reminder. Next comes VISIBILITY, in which the author tackles the slippery nature of imagination: particularly, the difference between image and word as the primary source of imagination, and whether it might be considered an “instrument of knowledge” or “identification with the world soul.” These two definitions are quoted, but Calvino offers a third: “the imagination as a repertory of what is potential, what is hypothetical ... the power of bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut, of bringing both forms and colors from the lines of black letters of a white page, and in fact *thinking* in terms of images.” Finally, MULTIPLICITY refers to “the idea of an *open* encyclopedia, an adjective that certainly contradicts the noun *encyclopedia*, which etymologically implies an attempt to exhaust knowledge of the world by enclosing it in a circle, but today we can no longer think in terms of a totality that is not potential, conjectural, and manifold.” This fifth memo promotes perhaps the most obvious of contemporary tropes: the network. The “sixth”, CONSISTENCY, was unrealized at the time of Calvino's death.

Throughout his attempt to grasp his precise relationship to these contemporary and, ideally, future qualities, Calvino constantly invokes polar opposites. The most memorable and profound is the pairing of *syntony* and *focalization*—participation in the world versus constructive concentration—in which he depicts the struggle of balancing the two as prerequisite for the creation of culture. Brian Eno also refers to poles, or axes, in various writings which propose thinking in terms of continuums or greyscales, between concepts rather than traditional binaries (from Neat/Shaggy to Capitalism/Communism):

Let's start here: “culture” is everything we don't have to do. We have to eat, but we don't have to have “cuisines,” Big Macs or Tournedos Rossini. We have to cover ourselves against the weather, but we don't have to be so concerned as to whether we put on Levi's or Yves Saint-Laurent. We have to move about the face of the globe, but we don't have to dance. These other things, we choose to do. We could survive if we chose not to.

I call the “have-to” activities functional and the “don't-have-to”s stylistic. By “stylistic” I mean that the main basis on which we make choices between them is in terms of their stylistic differences. Human activities distribute them on a long continuum from the functional (being born, eating, crapping and dying) to the stylistic (making abstract paintings, getting married, wearing elaborate lace underwear, melting silver foil onto our curries).

The first thing to note is that the whole bundle of stylistic activities is exactly what we would describe as “a culture”: what we use to distinguish individuals and groups from each other. We do not say of cultures “They eat,” but “They eat very spicy foods” or “They eat raw meat.” A culture is the sum of all the things about which humanity can choose to differ—all the things by which people can recognize each other as being voluntarily distinguished from each other.

But there seem to be two words involved here: culture, the package of behaviors-about-which-we-have-a-choice, and Culture, which we usually take to mean art, and which we tend to separate as an activity. I think these are connectable concepts: big-C Culture is in fact the name we reserve for one end of the FUNCTIONAL/STYLISTIC continuum—for those parts of it that are particularly and conspicuously useless, specifically concerned with style. As the spectrum merges into usefulness, we are inclined to use the words “craft” or “design,” and to accord them less status, and as it merges again into pure instinctual imperative we no longer use the word “culture” at all. From now onwards, when I use the word “culture” I am using it indiscriminately to cover the whole spectrum of activities excluding the “imperative” end. And perhaps that gives us a better name for the axes of this spectrum: “imperative” and “gratuitous”—things you have to do versus things you could choose not to do. (Eno, 1996)

I would assert that the main point of tension of a contemporary art/design school, what ought to preoccupy its faculty as well as its individual teachers, is the question of defining where on this sliding scale they exist—and then where they *should* exist (if different) within the current paradigm. Should teaching be more towards small-c culture or big-C Culture? I do not mean to imply some straight-forward value judgement here, but consider these two inventories:

There are many roles for designers even within a given sector of professional work. a functional classification might be: *Impresarios*: those who get work, organize others to do it, and present the outcome. *Culture diffusers*: those who do competent work effectively over a broad field, usually from a stable background of dispersed interests. *Culture generators*: obsessive characters who work in back rooms and produce ideas, often more use to other designers than the public. *Assistants*: often beginners, but also a large group concerned with administration and draughtsmanship. *Parasites*: those who skim off the surface of other people's work and make a good living by it. (Potter, 1969)

and:

Every one of them does many things well but one best: Each represents an archetype who builds a culture of creativity in a specific way. There is *The Talent Scout*, who hires the über-best and screens ideas at warp speed. *The Feeder*, who stimulates people's minds with a constant supply of new trends and ideas. *The Mash-up Artist*, who tears down silos, mixes people up, and brings in outside change agents. *The Ethnographer*, who studies human behavior across cultures and searches for unspoken desires that can be met with new products. *The Venture Capitalist*, who generates a diversified portfolio of promising ideas that translate into new products and services. (Conlin, 2006)

While both seem to reasonably summarize the roles which might inform contemporary design (or "communication" or whatever) courses, and the sort of "specializations" that might replace traditional discipline streaming, I would say the rhetoric and attitude of the first is geared towards *accommodating* demand, concerned with some vestige of *imperative* needs while that of the second is geared towards *creating* demand, which doesn't pretend to fulfill anything other than *gratuitous* needs. It is not too difficult to interpret the former as an attempt to maintain (big-C) Constructive principles, while the latter is resolutely resigned to (small-c) commodification. Again: consider where on the axis we currently stand, and where might we reasonably slide to—on both ethical and practical terms.

Future

If students [teachers] feel blocked by society as it is, then they must help find constructive ways forward to a better one. In a personal way, the question must be answered by individual students [teachers] in their own terms, but as far as design goes, it is possible to see two slippery snakes in the snakes and ladders game. The first snake is to suppose that the future is best guaranteed by trying to live in it; and the second is an assumption that must never go unexamined—that the required tools of method and technique are more essential than spirit and attitude. This snake offers a sterility that reduces the most "correct" procedures to a pretentious emptiness, whether in education or in professional practice. The danger is reinforced by another consideration. There can be a certain hollowness of accomplishment known to a student [teacher] in his own heart, but which he is obliged to disown, and to mask with considerations of tomorrow, merely to keep up with the pressures surrounding him. Apart from the success-criteria against which his work may be judged, there is a more subtle and pervasive competitiveness from which it is difficult to be exempt, even by the most sophisticated exercises in detachment. Hence the importance of recognizing that education is a fluid and organic growth of understanding, or it is nothing. Similarly, when real participation is side-stepped, and education is accepted lovelessly as a handout, then reality can seem progressively more fraudulent.

Fortunately, the veriest beginner can draw confidence from the same source as a seasoned design specialist, once it is realized that the foundations of judgement in design, and indeed the very structure of decision, are rooted in ordinary life and in human concerns, not in some quack professionalism with a degree as a magic key to the

mysteries. From then on, to keep the faith, to keep open to the future, is to know the present as a commitment in depth, and to know the past where its spirit can still reach us. (Potter, 1969)

Is there a way to rethink a curriculum which addresses the conditions variously described above (in more or less overlapping ways), which is fully aware of past dystopias, avoids the easy slide into trite idealism or, equally, facile marketing rhetoric, and isn't necessarily crowd-pleasing?; a proposal which consolidates the new demands to provide a grounding for art/design teachers to understand and be able to articulate *why*, *how*, and *towards what end* they are teaching art/design; and which does so by dealing with the root of the current mis-alignment of models, from the core of the institution with long-term foresight rather than the more familiar sense of temporarily shoring up the problem.

I think this involves being able to answer the following questions honestly and explicitly, and with concrete justifications and examples:

Is an increasingly generalized, inherently cross-disciplinary art/design education necessary and desirable? Why?

Is a broader encompassing of other social studies fields necessary and desirable for art/design education? Why?

Should a curriculum be *predominantly* geared towards 1. questioning, 2. fulfilling, or 3. creating ... either a. social needs, or b. commercial demands? Why?

We no longer have any desire for design that is driven by need. Something less prestigious than a "designed" object can do the same thing for less money. The Porsche Cayenne brings you home, but any car will do the same thing, certainly less expensively and probably just as quickly. But who remembers the first book, the first table, the first house, the first airplane? All these inventions went through a prototype phase, to a more or less fully developed model, which subsequently became design. Invention and the design represent different stages of a technological development, but unfortunately, these concepts are being confused with one another. If the design is in fact the aesthetic refinement of an invention, then there is room for debate about what the "design problem" is. Many designers still use the term "problem-solving" as a non-defined description of their task. But what is in fact the problem? Is it scientific? Is it social? Is it aesthetic? Is the problem the list of prerequisites? Or is the problem the fact that there is no problem? (Van der Velden, 2006)

Perhaps contemporary art/design teaching indeed implies less obvious "problem solving" and more a kind of social philosophy as suggested here, with admittedly oversimplified polarity, by Emilio Ambasz (as quoted by Van der Velden):

The first attitude involves a commitment to design as a problem-solving activity, capable of formulating, in physical terms, solutions to problems encountered in the natural and socio-cultural milieu. The opposite attitude, which we may call one of counter-design, chooses instead to emphasize the need for a renewal of philosophical discourse and for social and political involvement as a way of bringing around structural changes in our society. (Ambasz, 1972)

—and more or less confirmed here:

Education is all about trust. The teacher embraces the uncertain future by trusting the student, supporting the growth of something that cannot yet be seen, an emergent sensibility that cannot be judged by contemporary standards. A good school fosters a way of thinking that draws on everything that is known in order to jump energetically into the unknown, trusting the formulations of the next generation that by definition defy the logic of the present. Education is therefore a form of optimism that gives our field a future by trusting the students to see, think and do things we cannot.

This optimism is crucial. The students arrive from around 55 different countries with an endless thirst for experimentation. It is not enough for us to give each of them expertise in the current state-of-the-art. We have to give them the capacity to change the discipline itself, to completely define the state-of-the-art. More than simply training the architects how to design we redesign the very figure of the architect. The goal is not a certain kind of architecture but a certain kind of evolution in architectural intelligence.

The architect is, first and foremost, a public intellectual, crafting the material world to communicate ideas. Architecture is a way of thinking. By thinking differently, the architect allows others to see the world differently, and perhaps to live differently. This perhaps is crucial. For all the relentless determination of our loudest architects and their most spectacular projects, architecture dictates nothing in the end. The real gift of the best architects is to produce a kind of hesitation in the routines of contemporary life, an opening in which new potentials are offered, new patterns, rhythms, moods, pleasures, connections, perceptions ... offered as a gift that may or may not be taken up. (Wigley, 2006)

Following the line of many conversations with people both inside and outside the institution, I suggest that a practical way of proceeding is to directly reconsider the relevance of Bauhaus-derived skill-based workshop/studio teaching, precisely because it is such a platitude. An obvious starting point is to contest the key conviction of the canon of modernist art/design pedagogy (Malevich, Gropius, Kandinsky, Klee, Itten, Moholy-Nagy, Albers, etc.) that teaching programs should be, in the words of De Duve, “based on the reduction of practice to the fundamental elements of a syntax immanent to the medium,” the lingering notion of which is the systematic exploration of fundamentals such as shape, colour, texture, contrast, pattern, etc. through limited practical exercises; and the notion that the principles derived from this elemental experience could then be applied to any chosen medium.

Today, starting from zero, would our virgin curriculum—founded on the CONTEMPORARY paradigm circumscribed above by such as Findeli, De Duve and Eno—logically manifest itself in the same way? If the boundaries between disciplines are no longer watertight, with *attitude, practice* and *deconstruction* as the bedrock of our field, we need to reconsider the nature of the primary tools and skills offered to new students. As trite as it sounds, “thinking” covers both, as a more advanced Cultural version of “common sense.”

If the question of art is no longer one of producing or reproducing a certain kind of object (and if the medium no longer sets the terms of making—what “painting” demands, or sets out as a problem) then a responsible, medium-based training, which always says *how to make*, can't get to the question

of *what to make*. How does one get from assignments that can be fulfilled—color charts, a litho stone that doesn't fill in after x-number of prints, a weld that holds—to something that one can claim as an artist, to something that hasn't been assigned?

So there is a kind of gap or aporia that comes either in the middle of undergraduate art school or in between BFA and MFA, and that aporia marks a shift from the technical and teaching on the side of the teacher, to the psychological and teaching on the side of the student—working on the student rather than teaching him or her something. “He is saying this to me but what does he want?” as Lacan imagines the scene; or in the figure of the gift, “Is this what you want?” “Will you acknowledge this?” (Singerman, email 2006)

The idea of focusing on a more transferable “design thinking” implies not only easy communication and movement between disciplines (both physically and bureaucratically), but also the integration with broader social sciences: philosophy, sociology, aesthetics, etc.—towards what Potter described earlier as knowing “the present as a commitment in depth.”

Further, it seems imperative to introduce “design thinking” at the very beginning of the undergraduate program, precisely to allow a more sophisticated understanding of culture and Culture to inform and infect subsequent practical work. There are a number of ways of practical implementation at different extremes. One would be to offer a course in “design thinking” prior to any other media-specific and/or practical teaching; a second is to offer it alongside other teaching as a regular counterpart throughout preliminary practical classes; a third is to make it the explicit focus of the whole department, with specialisms, workshops and other practical teaching offered as supplementary offshoots from this core.

Such a class, course or even department might effectively focus on an open discussion about the very nature of being a contemporary artist/designer (which immediately invokes the nature of this very duality); involve direct connections—lectures, seminars, etc.—to the wider humanities disciplines; and be supplemented by broader practical projects, for example, incorporating architecture, graphic and environmental disciplines in a single teaching project.

All of this leans towards the development of prioritizing general *thinking* about art and design rather than *making* in a single specific medium; an approach which might be defined as working towards developing and nurturing *critical faculty* as a formative skill.

Artists are the subject of graduate school; they are both who and what is taught. In grammar school, to continue this play of subjects and objects, teachers teach art; in my undergraduate college, artists taught art. In the graduate school artists teach artists. Artists are both the subject of the graduate art department and its goal. The art historian Howard Risatti, who has written often on the difficulties of training contemporary artists, argued not long ago that “at the very heart of the problem of educating the artist lies the difficulty of defining what it means to be an artist today.” The “problem” is not a practical one; the meaning of an artist cannot be solved by faculty or administration, although across this book a number of professors and administrators try. Rather, the problem of definition is at the heart of the artist's education because it is the formative and defining problem of recent art. Artists are made by troubling it over, by taking it seriously. (Singerman, 2001)

Finally—in summary—what would be the potential payoff of an art/design pedagogy founded on *critical faculty*? What kind of outcome are we after?

A provisional answer: to educate students primarily towards becoming informed thinkers, sensitive to both culture at large (“the world”) as well as their specific Culture interests (e.g. “the art world,” “the design world”) and how both overlap and effect each other ...

... by introducing a vocabulary relevant to describing both forms of c/Culture (for example, defining and discussing the intricacies of the terms in De Duve’s table, from “talent” to “deconstruction”) ...

... in order to develop the skill of coherent articulation, fostering the ability to explain, justify, defend and argue for both self-made and others’ work ...

... towards an observable level of critical sophistication, where “critical” refers to engaged discussion as part of a historical and theoretical continuum rather than the regular ego-feeding value-judgments of the group or individual crit ...

... in short, to foster an environment of progressive reflexivity.

Educating reflexivity—teaching students to observe their practice from both inside and outside—offers students the facility to interrogate their potential roles and their effects. So upon entering the market, industry, commerce or whatever other distinction of post-school environment, they are at least equipped to ask whether they

want to / ought to / refuse to
enter into / challenge / reject (the)
existing art & design world / industry / academia / market

Alain Findeli proposes a similar model (which he expresses in terms of teaching an “intelligence of the invisible” through “basic design”) in order to redirect design education from its current path towards “a branch of product development, marketing communication, and technological fetishism,” stating “if it is not to remain a *reactive* attitude, it will have to become *proactive* ...”

If we accept the fact that the canonical, linear, causal, and instrumental model is no longer adequate to describe the complexity of the design process, we are invited to adopt a new model whose theoretical framework is inspired by systems science, complexity theory, and practical philosophy. In the new model, instead of science and technology, I would prefer perception and action, the first term referring to the concept of visual intelligence, and the second indicating that a technological act always is a moral act. As for the reflective relationship between perception and action, I consider it governed not by deductive logics, but by a logic based on aesthetics.

I believe that visual intelligence, ethical sensibility and, and aesthetic intuition can be developed and strengthened through some kind of basic design education. However, instead of having this basic design taught in the first year as a preliminary course, as in the Bauhaus tradition, it would be taught in parallel with studio work through the entire course of study, from the first to last year. Moholy-Nagy used to say that design was not a profession, but an attitude.

Didn't he claim that this course was perfectly fitted for any professional curriculum, i.e., not only for

designers, but also for lawyers, doctors, teachers, etc.? (Findeli, 2001)

This is not too far away from the recent “MFA is the new MBA” soundbite, which emphasizes another paradigm shift: the business world’s recognition of original thinking over traditionally conservative managerial procedures.

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If all this were accepted, the next problem would be how to monitor and accredit such a curriculum, not to mention how to articulate and justify it to apprehensive parents, and their children rapidly becoming more parent-like than their parents in their hunger for the pacifying fiction of predictable job pathways. But this is jumping too far ahead for now: I want to end by emphasizing that *what should be done?* ought to take clear precedence over concerns over *how should we do it?* Of course, again this is little more than simple, sturdy design-thinking-in-action (Step 1: *re-articulate the brief!*) which should be maintained not least because otherwise the usual brand of opinion-pollled, market-driven decision-making will surely only end up destroying the industry it floods with its supposedly satisfied customers. I suspect that maintaining this simple *what?*—then—*how?* sequence may well be the most difficult part of the challenge.

Note:

I have slightly amended many of these texts in order to facilitate easier reading. Because the flow demanded many minor omissions, instead of marking them with the usual [...], I have generally taken the liberty of re-composing regular sentences, but ensure that there is no loss or distortion of meaning. I strongly recommend reference to the original complete texts listed below:

- Roger Bridgman, ‘Statement’ and ‘Who Cares’, both reprinted in *Dot Dot Dot X*, Summer 2005
- Michelle Conlin, ‘Champions of innovation’ in *Business Week*, June 8, 2006
- Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1992)
- Thierry De Duve, ‘When form has become attitude—and beyond’ in *Theory in contemporary art since 1885* (Blackwell, Malden/Oxford/Carlton, 2005)
- Brian Eno, *A Year (With Swollen Appendices)* (Faber & Faber, London, 1996)
- Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making artists in the American university* (University of California Press, 1999)
- Howard Singerman, email to Frances Stark, 2006
- Alain Findeli, ‘Rethinking design education for the 21st century: theoretical, methodological and ethical discussion’ in *Design Issues*, vol.17 no.1, Winter 2001
- Robin Kinross, ed., *Anthony Froshaug: Documents of a Life / Typography & Texts* (Hyphen, London, 2000)
- Norman Potter, *What is a designer*, second edition (Hyphen, London, 1980)
- Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (William Morrow, 1974)
- Alex Seago, *Burning the box of beautiful things* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995)
- Daniel van der Velden, ‘Search and destroy’ in *Metropolis M*, 2006/2
- Frank Whitford, *Bauhaus* (Thames & Hudson, London, 1984)
- Mark Wigley, contribution to education issue of *AD* magazine, 2006