

dialogue between the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation and the Jakarta-based knowledge sharing platform Gudskul, the issue features a selection of historical case studies and conversations as well as in-depth reports and reflections about education practices under postcolonial conditions, shared by ten art and design collectives.

Decolonising design education

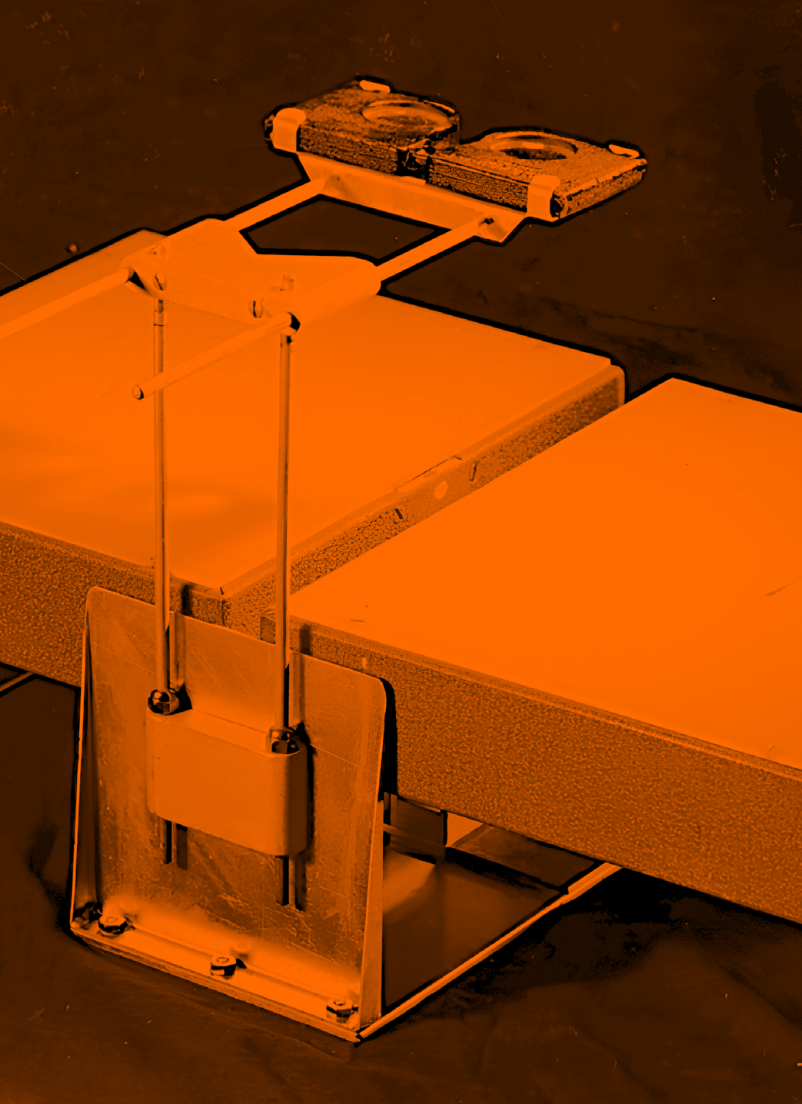
Schools of
Departure

No 1

Reading
time

178'

Intertwined pedagogies: A note to the monolith



In spring 2021, Offshore was commissioned by the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation to develop what was then called „a digital platform mapping art and design pedagogies beyond the Bauhaus“. The brief read, in part: “Against the mode of a narrative of ‘influences’ that starts from the assumption of the Bauhaus as a ‘centre’ and its movement into the non-European ‘periphery’, diverse and multidimensional interconnections should become visible. Contrary to the notion of a self-contained Bauhaus teaching concept that has been applied as a model in different schools, the reading proposed here is that of a heterogeneous conglomerate of pedagogical approaches, constantly changing in the course of its translations in different contexts.” Here, Offshore responds to this brief after the launch of the website in late 2022.

DEAR BAUHAUS,

thank you for getting in touch and considering us for this project. We read your letter with great excitement and feel intrigued by your invitation to “map the ramifications of the Bauhaus pedagogy after 1933”. As you might imagine, it will be a challenge to design a web platform for this rather ambitious endeavour, but we are more than happy to take it on. Please find our signature on the contract attached.

In eager anticipation of our first meeting, we want to start this journey with a personal anecdote already. Hopefully, this helps you to peep into our way of thinking.

If we remember correctly, we were nerdy first-year students at art academy, about to receive one of our first assignments. Our teacher asked us to create a family of abstract geometric signs, graphic symbols really, by using analogue tools only. Equipped with ink pens, rulers and graph paper we got our hands dirty and transformed the bodies of circles, squares and triangles rigorously. Working on their black and white shapes made us aware of composition and negative space, while their shimmering high-contrast edges sporadically caused visual vertigos. It is fair to say that this was fun, too. At least for a couple of classes. Until we learned that this assignment wasn’t to last only for a few weeks, but for the whole semester. After all, this was a version of The Bauhaus Model, as our teacher would say. And so he expected to see not only a handful, but hundreds of hand-drawn symbols, rendered with computer-like precision by the end of it. Whenever a student was moaning too loudly about the imposed agony, he would respond: “Don’t complain, you are developing a feeling for rational, timeless shapes and an archive of soon-to-be logos!”

This was back in 2008—and the global financial crisis was in full swing, with its bursting bubbles, bankrupt home buyers and non-stop mass layoffs. Following the news, we saw images of the banks and rating agencies that were to be blamed for the disaster. Irritatingly, their oversized logos on shiny facades and sky-high rooftops were bearing great resemblance to the symbols we were drawing in class.

Abstract, clean, geometric shapes. Against the visual backdrop of an insane global financial industry our “soon-to-be logos” didn’t look quite so “rational” anymore. We can’t recall why we never spoke about this in class, nor why our teacher kept dead quiet about it. Still, it might have been during these months when we sensed for the first time that your rational ideals did not necessarily beget the utopias you had envisioned. Instead, it seems like your pedagogies and practices are rather “deeply complicit in many structural systems of oppression” as researcher Claudia Mareis and educator-activist Nina Paim observe.¹

Rest assured: we don’t want to step on your toes with this anecdote. Indeed, ask any designer of our generation about the Bauhaus and a few positive glimpses and awe for key figures will be on the table—from Anni Albers to Paul Klee, from Wassily Kandinsky to László Moholy-Nagy. However, as we reflect on our relationship with you, it was moments of friction and crises like the one of 2008 that made us question your and other omniscient design dogmas that are built for eternity. In our humble view, the world was always too pluralistic, complex and contradictory for such static, hegemonic horizons. As a result, we—in our double-role as designers and educators—are continuously trying to unlearn and re-imagine your rigid rules.

This dip into the past might help you to understand how enthused we were when we received your brief. What a pleasure to hear that you want to

scrutinise the myth of a monolithic Bauhaus model, composed of timeless and universal truths! And you might agree with us when we point to the views of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. He, too, argued against an all-wise, static pedagogy when he wrote that “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.”² We couldn’t agree more.

Naturally, such pluralistic modes of knowledge production have infiltrated your pedagogy in manifold ways. In fact, the rigid image of THE Bauhaus model is an illusion. Over the last decades you have been distorted, deformed and destroyed, hacked, hated and loved, cracked, smashed and reconstructed a billion times. An ever-changing conglomerate of heterogenous educational impulses would likely be a better description of your nature over time. Without a doubt then, the fragments of your pedagogical aftermath are not gone. Instead, they hurry-scurry in a dense and multi-dimensional web of educational practices until today.

Obviously, this densely entangled net is not easy to map. How can one shed light on all its threads throughout space and history? How shall we trace its ever-changing architecture, nodes and inhabitants that, to cite your brief, “do not follow the idea of a chronological sequence of past, present and future, but move between different geographies, times and cultures”?³ How shall we map this fungi-like,

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decentralised, non-linear *longue durée* of knowledge production, and how to access all the relations that exist within it?

As we discussed these questions, we were hit by an idea. While still in its early stages, it nevertheless might provide a basic strategy to disentangle your web. We are aware that what follows might sound somewhat anachronistic and strange even—but we are serious—for as the core of it forms the *light table*.

Have you ever noticed what an ingenious research tool a light-table is? In the past it was used to review film negatives, or to copy designs for cartoons, animations, architecture and fashion. Some-

times, it was also deployed to analyse fish ovaries, examine leaf structures or interpret aerial photographs taken by military Tomcat squadrons.⁴ Today, the light table might be considered an object on the brink of extinction, but it still fascinates. For it enables to order, examine, trace and arrange objects on its unpretentious surface. You turn on the lights and all of a sudden, a passive, dark space becomes an illuminated, active surface that allows to observe and arrange freely. There are no prewritten narratives, no ingrained hierarchies, no rules. It enables to drag in and drag out as you wish, examine and juxtapose forms, objects and images, compose sequences, and discover relationships. Now, allow us to imagine for a moment that we could apply such non-linear methods of investigation not only to photographs, drawings or fish, but indeed to your educational web. Wouldn't it equally allow to expose, examine and investigate its nodes, arrangements and interdependencies, thereby seeing otherwise invisible narratives?

In our view, a digital space inspired by the working methods of a light table would illuminate your entanglements with the world. Almost akin to the work of American conceptual artist Mark Lombardi, whose large-scale drawings shone light onto shady power structures by visualizing the relationships of politicians, multinational corporations and criminal organisations in a graphic way. He called them 'narrative structures'. They became so elaborate that journalists, and supposedly even the FBI, used them for their investigations.⁵

We are not sure if we want to stimulate the interest of Europol with our mapping endeavour, but we think Lombardi's way of working might serve as a great starting point. Powerful opportunities will open up when isolated bits of information are linked to bigger stories within a complex network of interdependencies, like yours. Of course, Lombardi created his links in an analogue way, simple lines on paper situated between names. On the contrary, our project will exist within the digital realm. Here, the pen-drawn line of Lombardi is elevated to a hyperlink, while names and places are transformed into tags, folders and metadata. The sum of those related digital elements holds, like Lombardi's canvas, myriad narratives and knowledges that wait to be found.

Ted Nelson, the inventor of the hyperlink, famously coined the term 'intertwinguarity' to describe the idea that all knowledge in the universe is deeply interconnected.⁶ We think this is not only beautiful, but more importantly, we think this is true. No doubt, knowledge comes with power structures, but at the same time it is always relational, nested and entangled; it flows through time, space and bodies, even to the point of confusion. This is why also your pedagogy is deeply intertwined. And we hope you agree that your intertwined educational web could be examined, exposed and enriched on a digital light table. By illuminating your manifold threads and connections with other schools, actors, objects and ideas, unknown relationships and narrative structures might emerge on its surface.

Finally, allow us to express a word of warning: Seeing other systems of thought that run through your monolithic walls might shake your foundations a bit. Maybe you will be surprised, irritated and scared by what you learn. Maybe this will feel a bit destabilising. A bit like leaving the safe walls of your building to enter a confusing mixture of pasts, presents and futures. In these plurivocal spaces you might discover unknown connections and learn new things about yourself. And maybe—to borrow the hopeful words of bell hooks⁷—our endeavour will even allow you to forget that self and, through ideas, reinvent yourself.

We are looking forward to our first meeting.

Sincerely yours,

Offshore

- 1 Claudia Mareis and Nina Paim. *Design Struggles. Intersecting Histories, Pedagogies and Perspectives* (PLURAL) Amsterdam: Valiz, 2021, p. 11.
- 2 Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum Books, 2005, p. 72.
- 3 Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau. *Schulen des Aufbruchs: Angebotsanforderung*, document, Dessau, 2021.
- 4 Wikimedia Commons image collection of light tables: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Light_tables?uselang=de, accessed 1 February 2023.
- 5 Mareike Wegener. *Mark Lombardi—Kunst und Konspiration*. documentary film. Germany: Arte, 2012.
- 6 Theodor H. Nelson. *Computer Lib*. South Bend, 1974, p. 45.
- 7 bell hooks. *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York / London: Routledge, 1994, p. 3.

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'Schools of Departure' is a multi-year research project by the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation, with the aim of establishing a digital atlas mapping experiments in art and design education beyond the historical Bauhaus. This book aggregates a selection of texts that have initially been created for the online platform of the project. It is the first volume of a series published in the context of 'Schools of Departure', with new volumes to appear on a yearly basis. Addressing the histories and speculating about the futures of educational reforms seeking to decolonise ways of knowing and making, this issue titled *Decolonising design education* specifically looks at the role that different modes of instituting can take on for these struggles. Developed in a dialogue between the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation and the Jakarta-based knowledge sharing platform Gudskul, the issue features a selection of historical case studies and conversations as well as in-depth reports and reflections about education practices under postcolonial conditions, shared by ten art and design collectives.

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