

The first thing I did when I became head of the Design Department at the Sandberg Instituut was to have a kitchen installed and ask the students how we could improve their space in order for them to spend more time together and work at the institute. By default, educational environments are often rather non-sensorial spaces, easy to clean, multifunctional, hierarchical, and prepared for rough use. Generally, those spaces do not in the first place constitute a pleasant or inviting environment for learning processes to take place in the best possible way. These non-sensorial rooms quickly become places just for the mind, for cognitive processes and digital delusion. Spaces in which our bodies cannot feel, smell, see and truly listen; spaces that do not favour contact with the environment at large.

MEETING

Looking back at my own student years, the most relevant moments, the experiences that were transformative, the ones from which I truly learned, took place outside the educational infrastructures. They were during excursions, trips to other places, sharing food on the rooftop of our school building in the evening and then working until dawn. The conversations we had in cafes or during the rides on our bikes to art school the next morning were often so relevant—even in their irrelevance. These significant moments were not planned; they originated in meeting each other, meeting the other. The experiences we gained during these shared moments often provided more insight than the specific knowledge transferred by the curriculum. Realizing that the best-valued education took place outside the ‘system’, I wonder to what extent the enhanced learning outside is relying on that system and if we can better integrate ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. How far do we need the educational infrastructure to bring us together, to set the conditions in which we can exchange? What conditions are needed on the ‘inside’ in order to let the ‘outside’ flourish, which can naturally move to the period ‘after’ school?



Introduction Week 2016, Pajottenland (B). Cyanne van den Houten and Derk Over sorting the harvest. Photo: Lien van Leemput

TRANSFORMATION

Together with the team and students we talked about how we as a collective body can avoid reproducing hierarchy and act in conditions of network, commons, and collectivism. We turned monologues into dialogues and shifted our focus more to circular processes as opposed to linear ones. We naturally moved from discussing our work in terms of aesthetics, and talked ethics; because our reality is precarious and our security highly vulnerable. We wanted to turn consumption into

participation, and not talk in terms of markets, but focus on terms of makers and users, where copyright can be open source, having is sharing, and the ecological overrules the economical. Ultimately, in order to transform a neoliberal logic to thinking and acting in commons, where engagement means responsibility. How can we reclaim our own narratives, imagine different ways of being together and develop design practices that can try different futures? While developing the curriculum for the Design Department with the team, I speculated that we could look at the structure of the curriculum in a way that gives more space to sensorial experiences. And what role does trust play there?

TRUST

At the start of each academic year I invite the students in my house, a former farm where I live with my son and husband, in the Belgian region of Pajottenland. With the full group of students (24 in the most intensive year) we live, eat and stay overnight together for several days. Without exception, these have been excellent opportunities to get to know each other in a way that is totally different from the educational infrastructure and context; we were outside the city, outside school, in a private home full of oxygen. Thinking about a trust-based-educational model, personally I can't go much further in mutual trust than to invite all the students into my house. Of course, all of us felt uncomfortable at first, but each year the experience turned out magically. It provided another way to meet, other contexts for conversations, helping each other, practicing hospitality, entertaining one and other, initiate and respond to food and nature. The last few years the focus was shifting naturally to more sensorial experiences. This was highly appreciated, much more than the (really interesting) guest tutors and movie screenings that were set up previously. Initially I tended to programme too much input for the week, but the more unplanned moments sparked by the senses sneaked in, the bigger the magic and the greater the response of the students. Something hard to describe really changed the energy in the group. People started to relate to each other in a different way, took care, listened and joined forces in developing new ideas.

Last autumn the walnut trees had abundantly spilled their ripe nuts onto the lawn. The joy and enthusiasm with which everyone was collecting the nuts was remarkable. We bought fresh milk from a local farmer and for some of the students it appeared to be the first time they saw cows being milked. We picked blackthorn berries to make an elixir and tasted new sensations. In a discussion on food, Rudy Luijters—artist and my husband—had been asked about our chickens. On the menu that evening

was, apart from vegetables from our garden, also chicken, our own. None of the students had ever witnessed the slaughtering, and Rudy was asked if some could witness this ritual and help pluck the feathers of the two chickens. Those who preferred not to, joined the group that was making bread. Several of them did this for the first time and while kneading the dough we had the most inspiring conversations. During hikes, childhood memories about the landscape, gathering food and cultural habits were shared; many memories were activated. Students from so many different backgrounds provide a unique insight into these kinds of practices and rituals in different regions in the world. What was most interesting is that these conversations and experiences fed the understanding of processes: that of food production, culture, transportation, trade, power relations, exploitation, carbon emissions. It provided ground for a broader understanding of what and where we are as humans. As a society we have become so disconnected; most of us have only a vague clue about the origin of the produce, of production methods, ingredients. But our daily bread is not self-evident, every meal we have has consequences. As a 'designer of education' it is important to me in this regard how processes of understanding can be triggered; how can we reconnect to the objects we use, their social implications, our local position, environment, food and the personal stories we want to share.

TRUST, AGAIN

Education is a process of change, of transformation; it is about being confronted with other ideas, gaining new knowledge and practical skills. The best education is adaptive, resilient, and listens to its participants. I value collective knowledge to the largest extent and firmly believe in the necessity of shared knowledge in the group, to learn from each other. The educational framework sets the conditions for this knowledge to be shared. It starts with a sense of curiosity, respect, and active listening. But how can this be organized? How to really take care for each other? How to meet otherness? We tried to answer these questions with what we consider as a trust-based educational model, with no grades, no prescribed expectations, and co-authorship for the students. Of course, trust is a very complicated notion. We had many discussions about this at our department, often with me explaining how we see trust and students responding that trust is not self-evident for everybody. With the many backgrounds in the body of students, not all of them feel (or can feel) comfortable, safe, or trusted. Education is by definition a hierarchy and inhabits power structures that aren't inclusive to all. Still, over and over, each year again, we try to express our belief in education based on trust, and not on rankings, credits, validations, and existing standards.

Trust is a conversation, a process, a personal relation, and never a given fact. We, the team of tutors, try to stimulate and articulate the individual qualities of the students, show that we have confidence in their ambition, and urge them to start from that relation. While sharing our vulnerabilities and insecurities, we want to talk about the motives and the processes of making, stimulate a solid mentality, a practice of thinking and making, rooted in one's own position. Students should really study for their own sake. We support them in realizing experimental plans, by allowing each other to be vulnerable, to have the space to fail and to find their own voice. How can we build a safe environment where trust can thrive within a hierarchical structure? How do we organize care? How can we generate curiosity as a driving force for studying? And how do we enable and support students to deal with their realities?

DEPARTMENT SPACE

Collaborating with the students we developed strategies to improve the space we worked in. A large wooden table was the central point, and at a certain moment it was considered too big. We cut it in half to make two tables and moved these according to the size and needs of gatherings and meetings. We talked about how to contribute as little as possible to waste production and collected second-hand wooden furniture. At some point sewing machines were brought in by Tessel Brühl (student 2012-2014), which spontaneously resulted in the group collectively making camouflage suits for the Open Day. Some other time, a second-hand RISO printer was embraced and a light table was brought in—and fulfilled all kinds of unexpected functions, especially during presentations.



Gilles de Brock (NL), Marthe Prins (NL) and Benedikt Weishaupt (DE), selfmade cloud-camouflage costume, for Open Day, 2014. Photo: Annelys de Vet



Tessel Brühl (NL) and Jaroslav Toussaint (DE), *Flight Forward—Welcome To The Flagship Store!*, graduation project 2014

The genuinely new is having hard times. Society is addicted to the superfluously new—new for the sake of newness—producing and consuming aesthetic stimuli without end. *Flight Forward* reclaims imagination, exploring creative practices that go beyond enhancing the commodity fetish. *Flight Forward* fights for the genuinely new, restoring the power of the aesthetic producer. The flagship store offers tools and strategies and a space to play, in order to collectively create the genuinely new with shape, colour, sound and structure. Our objects materialize a view to commodities, in order to trigger the imagination of their users. With these, we can immerse ourselves in an atmosphere of chaos and abundance. Branding offers no escape. Attack is the only way out.

Guido Giglio sketching out table design at wood workshop Rietveld Academie, 2012. Photo: Hannes Bernard



Another year we had a group of students who took the initiative to build their own tables in the wood workshop of the Rietveld Academie. Hannes Bernard (student 2011-2013) and Guido Giglio (student 2010-2012) initiated the *Guild Project*¹ and invited their fellow students to develop wooden desks. Within a given structure, each student made her or his own variation and during moments of collectively sharing the work, the tables played a role in various settings. The wall of our space was covered with cork so sketches could be attached, and ideas shared, allowing unexpected combinations to arise. It was also great acoustically, although at some point it was abhorred and painted white. What counts is the agency of the students for their space. Each time again, we discussed with the new group how to improve their environment, what to do to make them feel safe here and wanting to stay. Learning spaces should be modified to be able to freely express oneself in them and to make the processes of learning beneficial to

1. *Guild Project*, 20 February 2012: 'The Legion of the Nocturnal Parachute Dance is a multi-disciplinary Guild based at the Sandberg Instituut, in Amsterdam. The aim of this guild is to explore the role of production as a visual language & the meaning of manufacturing. While designers today play ever-changing roles in an endless onslaught of information—curators, interpreters, editors—the guild places an emphasis on the designer as a producer of the physical, though we reward both pragmatics & politics with equal measure.'

each other. What helped tremendously is that the students had 24-hour access to the building. I realized this was an important condition to really be committed to a space.

DESIGN

Although design students remain some of the most forward-thinking individuals, designers are occupying rather fragile positions in society. As a department, we hope to provide a space for young people to prepare for a practice within a profession that is increasingly hard to define. Design today is not about forms or things, but about a mentality and an understanding of the context and underlying structures. Our students graduate not with a designed 'object' or a style, but with a practice. They're being challenged to discover what kind of designer they want to be and in what kind of position to act—or not to act. In this context the different perspectives within a design practice can vary from storyteller to agent, to facilitator, from host to collective, community, or from researcher to author or participant. We address design as a tool to deal with reality, to relate to complex truths, as a compass to find your way and figure out what matters. We're aiming to use design as an emancipatory instrument and even as a form of resistance. How can design unsettle and challenge social, political, cultural, and economic ideas and prejudices? How can design help to imagine a different future?

CONTACT

In 2007 I went to Ramallah in occupied Palestine to conduct a workshop at the International Academy of Art Palestine. Being there, I witnessed the oppression and the colonial reality at very close hand and realized how my education had completely failed in informing my generation about this struggle. Collaborating with artists and design colleagues there profoundly changed me as a person and as a practitioner. Putting the artistic work in such a political context made me rethink the position of my practice and how through design I could contribute to the debate on who and where we are. This experience was the incentive to engage the students at the Sandberg Instituut in related workshops in Palestine, at first together with the International Academy of Art Palestine and later together with other Palestinian institutes. Every year we developed a workshop with local partners and invited students from the Design Department who were interested to join a workshop in Ramallah, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Amman or Jerash and collaborate with Palestinian artists, designers, and students

to develop useful products with local artisans.² We worked with a majority of local participants within the group and investigated the existing production processes, the role of crafts in society and what illegal occupation, settler colonialism, and racism actually mean on a human scale. Again, we had the best conversations over lunches and dinners, during the trips in the bus from one place to another and during the many unexpected gatherings. It was a unique opportunity to learn from each other. Local and international designers from different backgrounds worked collaboratively and shared their processes, lines of thinking, frames of reference, and different lived realities. The partnerships in Palestine provided a totally different context for the students to relate to. Cultural differences, political differences, design as

Mohammad Ishtay (PS) and Tessa Meeus (NL), *Carrying Home*, 2017, embroidered travel pouch to never return to the camp, for Disarming Design from Palestine. Photo: Celine Callens



Mark Jan van Tellingen (NL), *Watchtowers and water tanks game*, 2013, an alternative chess set that is impossible to play, for Disarming Design from Palestine. Photo: Celine Callens



2. The thought-provoking design label ‘Disarming Design from Palestine’ aims to spread human and cultural narratives about life in Palestine through useful products that address the occupation from inside out, with the ambition to humanize and ‘disarm’ the often violent media image of the Palestinian situation. In direct collaboration with local partners, they want to sharpen the debate on the situation and reflect upon the potential of creative practices in situations of conflict. Annual workshops were organized in which Palestinian and international designers from the Sandberg Instituut collaborated with local producers. Jointly they designed new goods out of existing production techniques and available, mostly local, resources. By stimulating interdisciplinary working relations new artistic models were developed; the project presented design as a platform for discourse and questioned how creative practices can contribute to the emancipation, self-empowerment, and resilience of people in marginalized positions.

a tool to engage and a reason to pose questions and listen. All familiar arguments, and the ways they are frequently used, shifted—or became problematic. The students placed their work in a political dimension, and discussed it beyond aesthetics or functionality, but through process and impact. It triggered us to think more about how design can be a platform to underrepresented and suppressed voices. How can it be a tool for emancipation and self-empowerment?

BEING CONNECTED

Through design one can reclaim agency in another way than for example journalism, politics, or the arts can do. But design can also easily be a tool for economic and political oppression, and indirectly or directly contribute to the reinforcement of existing power relations instead of resisting them—for instance when design is solely presented as a marketing instrument or problem-solving tool. Do precarious situations demand even more articulated conditions and an engaged mentality for designers in order to maintain an emancipating position? Education is a socializing experience; it is supposed to deal with reality. But education is never a neutral process. It ‘either functions as an instrument used to integrate new generations into the logic of the present system, or education becomes the means by which students are allowed to deal critically with (their) reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of (their) future’.³ It is essential for designers to understand how to attain agency in the discussions that shape our world, and use their expertise to support the values they stand for. In order to educate self-reflexive practitioners and thinkers who open up their senses and can produce knowledge in situated contexts, I believe a curriculum cannot have a fixed structure but should remain truly responsive and stimulate the sensorial to take place. It will make us more sense-itive to feel, smell, see, and listen, and stay in contact with our environment at large, starting at the places we are in ourselves.

3. Johanna Lewengard (Konstfack, Stockholm): ‘Education is never a neutral process, I believe we need to establish this. Education either functions as an instrument used to integrate new generations into the logic of the present system, or education becomes the means by which students are allowed to deal critically with (their) reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of (their) future. This is a question about whether we believe in education as a practice of integration or if we believe in education as a practice of liberation. But no matter what we believe in as educators, we all should at least be transparent about our approaches. Every student should have the right to know what kind of learning processes they will enter. What is most critical with higher education today, is not that the vast majority of universities in Europe operate according to processes of integration, but that we believe this is a neutral activity.’

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