

BURG GIEBICHENSTEIN – UNIVERSITY OF ART AND DESIGN HALLE IN PROCESS since 1990

A long and changeful story - or: The Parable of the Frog

Teaching and Research As a University of Art and Design, Burg Giebichenstein has since 1990 been projecting a new image of itself, not just through its teaching and research programmes but also, and to an equal extent, through national and international exhibitions, through symposia and excursions, through interdisciplinary projects and world-wide collaboration with other universities of Art and design, and, last but not least, through the fusion of erstwhile traditions with contemporary ideas.

However, these processes of university reform were marked from the very outset by fragility which has manifested itself above all in the fact that the fundamental freedoms of teaching and research have had to be asserted time and time again, for there have always been restrictions to contend with - whether economic, cultural or political, or whether self-imposed in consequence of dogmatic approaches. Crises brought about by controversial attitudes are indispensable, indeed they are the very humus that nourishes our awareness of problems, for nothing can be more fatal for a university than finding the right solutions to the wrong problems. The playwright Heiner Müller once narrated a parable about the theatre, but it is a parable which also holds good for the institution of the university.

»If you throw a frog - and this is true, it's been demonstrated - into hot water, it will try to get out as quickly as it can. But if you place a frog in lukewarm water and then gradually increase the temperature, it will quite happily allow itself to be boiled to death; it will simply boil away, oblivious of its fate. It just won't notice (laughs). That's a parable of life in our society, and in the theatre, too, as that is a miniature model of our society (laughs). The boiled frog.« (Interview with Ute Scharfenberg, 16th October 1995).

Thus nothing is more fatal for a university than being an Identitätsmaschine with fixed programmes and laws and, by the same token, finding itself in lukewarm water. The »leap out of the hot water« is the distinguishing mark of a university that turns out active and productive people. Teaching and research mean finding and creating solutions which presuppose an extreme awareness of reality, a high degree of reflectiveness and the courage to make changes. For the difficulty lies in the need to respond to the outer complexity of a world and society that are moving forward at lightning speed and are characterized by social and cultural contradictions with the inner complexity of teaching and research, theory and practice - and in the light of the challenging fact that not even political models are complex enough to alleviate the structural crises of high-wage societies, let alone resolve them.

If we see the university as a sociocultural seismograph which is prepared to interfere, then it must indeed face up to the problems posed by discourses and negotiations in our social systems; it must intervene in processes generated by whole network of disciplines and interest groups; it must train its teachers and researchers to react alertly to everything that seems lacking in sense, through increased attention, biting scepticism and critical opposition, and not only against ideological and media-political constructs of realities and perceptions, notions and theories, but against themselves, as a university, against its faculties, its works and its results. Being constantly critical of its own function - namely to teach the art of art, the design of design, as it were - means harking back to fundamental questions again and again: what is the status of art, what is the importance of design in the ever changing structure of our society?

No matter how purposeful the teaching and training structures of the faculties of Art and Design may be, they will never do full justice to the complexity of what is studied. The latter demands a diversity of capabilities: intelligence, intuition, imagination, playfulness, perseverance, inventiveness and, last but not least - and to an ever-increasing extent -, communication and cooperation skills which enable students to meet the social and cultural challenges of our information society. Indeed, the aptitude tests which serve to establish precisely these skills must today be most demanding.

Moreover, this sociocultural relevance is best (ob)served when art and design is no longer just concerned with the work of art or object of design itself but rather - and above all - with their contexts, with the web of ever-changing historical references and their broad scope of interpretation, for then the study of art or design can be likened to a small boat out at sea, riding the waves with the utmost agility. After all, »sailing on the high seas has become a metaphor of our journey through life, although it has never been what one would consider normal < or commonplace < on the contrary, it is rather like reaching beyond the limits towards the eerie and the uncanny« (Hans Blumenberg). Thus the university may be compared to a fundamental nautical experience, an experience of exploring life and the world - but not just that, for it is an experience which also creates designs, produces results and, moreover, is aware of the chasm between cognition and trial and error, between theory and realization, between the functional and the aesthetic, between realities and ideals. The challenge is to establish a contemporaneity which is able to anticipate the future, and not just regionally but globally, too. The content- and this also applies to past linear notions of progress - must be constantly re-interpreted, and the teaching and training facilities available to the university must be measured against international standards. This means developing, on the one hand, a sociocritical understanding of the world about us and, on the other, a marked media awareness, both of which can be sustained by the university through large-scale projects (such as the Geiseltal Redevelopment Project) and new courses of study (e.g., Multimedia| VR Design and Art and Media).

Thus the two faculties of Art and Design seek to achieve a complex fusion of understanding and doing, an interaction between all those involved, the organizers, the institutions, the designers, the recipients and/or users. Even if such relationships are less prominent in the art context, art does in fact share the same lot as design, for its products must likewise be promoted and marketed before they can reach their ultimate »consumers«, whereby their sales territory is becoming more and more public and less and less the traditionally exclusive domain of art, a circumstance which will necessarily bring about a significant change in the artist's profession, too. Indeed, the university is

altogether aware of the fact that aesthetic qualities can be acquired only in the context of superordinate relationships and scenarios - scenarios which mediate between the individual and group and not only make critical allowance for unconsciously internalized patterns of behavior but also, and to an equal extent, give a free rein to the imagination.

The name of the university today puts art on an equal footing with design (*cum grano salis*). This equality of art and design does not mean, however, that the university offers an integrated course of study, a synthesis of all disciplines. On the contrary, it puts the emphasis on a whole diversity of individual disciplines and on the highest possible qualifications and degrees of specialization in each single one of them. All the same, interdisciplinary courses of study are also possible.

The general context for all students are the Basic Studies, which, as many teachers at the university maintain, are absolutely indispensable. Lasting four half-year terms, the Basic Studies lay claim to a considerable part of the entire courses. All students also receive a thorough introduction to the history of art, design and architecture, Gestalt psychology and design theory. The Basic Studies feature significantly in the long story of Burg Giebichenstein, the story that began with the all-embracing art concept introduced by Paul Thiersch when the university was founded as a reformed arts and crafts school in 1915.

Basic Studies between Rules and interactivities The Basic Studies take up a particularly large part of the course of study, for they are a guaranteed means of preparing students for the study of art and design: they are concerned with processes of abstraction, with the primary, syntactical elements of design - color, form, surface, space - and with the mimetic representation of nature and the human body. Their study guarantees that aesthetic cleansing process which was an essential part of the »mythical beginnings« of the reformed school of arts and crafts, where academic traditionalism was abandoned in favour of an aesthetic utopia - with the ultimate aim of aestheticizing society in symbiosis of art and life.

The teaching of the Platonic Solids had a homogeneous, Gesamtkunstwerk character, altogether akin to the cosmological model of Plato's »Timaeus«, programmatically the first hand-printed publication of the »Workshops« of Burg Giebichenstein, dating from 1925, was very much in the style of an art movement's manifesto, for the concept of the school was based on the holistic approach and Romantic socialism of the Arts and Crafts Movement, and on the ideal of the mediaeval guild. Indeed, the school's principal Paul Thiersch, himself an architect, recognized painting and sculpture as applied arts only in connection with architecture. The work of the artist craftsman was henceforth to be judged by the same criteria as those governing the work of the painter and the sculptor, the aim being to defend those artistic values which industrialization and the devastating effects of the First World War had threatened to destroy.

Thus it was not without a certain degree of cultural pessimism that Paul Thiersch, a man whose views had been largely influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche and Stefan George, reacted to the scientific, intellectualized approach to arts and crafts as adopted by the Bauhaus under Walter Gropius. Thiersch countered Gropius's »Unity of Art and Technology« with his »Unity of Mind and Form«. Whilst the Bauhaus concept was based on a typification and mechanization of design, Burg Giebichenstein placed the emphasis

more on the artistic performance of the individual. This was characterized by a tendency towards contemplation, whereas the Bauhaus tended more towards a dynamic training of the senses: the cube at rest, not the hovering diagonal; the lyrical Orpheus, not the industrial designer; the tactility of such primary materials as wood and clay, not the coldness of glass and metal; the elementary, not the process - these were just a few of the design principles which distinguished Burg Giebichenstein from the Bauhaus. Whilst in 1925 the Bauhaus moved into a modern, functional, transparent building in Dessau, the restored 17th century building of Burg Giebichenstein had since 1920/21 been housing classrooms and workshops for courses in architecture, stage design, interior design, wood work, painting, fine and applied art, photography, bookbinding and bookbinding, ceramics, metalworking, enamelling and textile crafts. The Preliminary Course at the Bauhaus had its equivalent in the Basic Studies at Burg Giebichenstein. After 1955, these principles were developed by Lothar Zitzmann into a self-contained visual design system, but still with the conviction that the teaching of aesthetic standards was altogether in keeping with the ethical aims of reformed teaching methods.

By difference, Basic Studies have, since 1994, developed also into an interactive course which places the emphasis more on the student's own initiative, on his or her own subjective approach. Methods and strategies, and their utilization for complex problems, are now the keynote. Solutions to specific aesthetic problems are now arrived at through experimentation, an approach which demands both intuition and rationality and also creates optimum prerequisites for an orientation course. It is not the result but the experiment itself, which is now the objective.

The Basic Studies are very difficult to objectivize and, like the individual disciplines, must rise to a dynamic challenge, not only as regards their own claim to being at once fundamental and in keeping with present-day requirements but also in the way they relate the claims of the individual disciplines, both practical and theoretical. They provoke debate on the importance, function and efficacy of »basics« when drawing comparisons between universities in an international context.

Applied Arts and Extended Concepts The long story of the reformed arts and crafts school has been marked throughout by a preoccupation with the suitability of materials, with the applicability of the art, their purposefulness and the »honesty« of form in arts and crafts. It is a story which has forever taken up a socially and culturally critical stance in defence of an aesthetic/ethical approach to design. It is a story which, since the foundation of the school, has been upheld by the excellence of its workshops, though not without certain culture-political setbacks, above all during the Nazi and GDR regimes. It was at all times the aesthetic of the material, and above all its suitability for its purpose and vice versa, which underlay the school's tradition-oriented, figural understanding of modernism, an understanding born of the belief in theme and motif, message and symbol, in the historical commitment of form and in the social responsibility of the arts.

With the arrival of newly appointed professors, this chapter of the long and changeable story of Burg Giebichenstein became the theme of a »very German debate« (Walter Grasskamp), a debate which had a not insignificant part to play in a large-scale, intra-German »iconoclastic controversy«. Art based on a socially committed attitude which demanded »truth« and »morality« in aid of political objectives, borrowing from the

history of art all the pathos it needed and conjuring up a »Cathedral of Socialism« in the broadest sense, versus art without a mission, art responsible only to itself, art dedicated solely to »the revolution of creativity« (Joseph Beuys), art with an open message, challenging but not didactic. These new ideas based on an extended concept of art were indeed a challenge, for form and content could now not only be completely reappraised but also expressed - experimentally and intermodally - in performances, installations, environments and concept art - and even in unorthodox triviality, and in the virtual reality of the new media. The new visual and audiovisual media also afford - as »time machines« (Siegfried Zielinski) - an innovative access to art, permitting the »shaping« of time and the breaking down of the traditional barriers between the still and the moving image. Not only have these media been integrated into our basic teaching programme but they also constitute independent disciplines. This completely new field of art and media is rapidly gaining in importance.

These controversial dialogues are ongoing, for it is as though the ghosts of the Expressionist Max Beckmann and the Conceptualist Marcel Duchamp cannot rest, the former's notion of the »masterpiece « forever locked in dispute with the latter's »meta-irony «. Would these two artists ever have been able to come to terms with each other as teachers? Hardly - and not least because both of them are all too aware of the contradictory strategies of modernism - commitment and autonomy, for example, or realism and abstraction. Thus the university still finds itself in the midst of a productive discourse. Indeed, everything here is still very much on the boil, while the art market has long since simmered down, having suppressed such contentious issues with profit-oriented indifference.

Whilst this long story admits reforms, it does so only very slowly, and only partially. The disciplines offered in the »fine« and »applied« arts have gradually developed over the years, adding art education, as well. These same disciplines at other universities of art and design have long since been scrapped, such as bookprinting and bookbinding, for example. In those classes revolving around such materials as glass, ceramics, metal and textiles, students are able to learn and practice craft skills which at many universities became obsolete long ago. Moreover, completely new impulses and concepts - new in terms of both form and content - are now being taken up and developed, entirely in keeping with the extended notion of art. And projects aimed at bringing art and design closer together invite us to reflect upon new aesthetic constellations.

Functionalistic and/or Complex Design

The identity of form and function likewise belongs to the long arts and crafts story of Burg Giebichenstein, whereby the extended notion of function ultimately found expression in the development of functional forms aimed at doing justice to living conditions in an industrialized and / or urban environment, very much in keeping with the modernist ideas of Louis Henry Sullivan. The unity of art and technology, rejected by Paul Thiersch back in the twenties, became part and parcel of the curriculum since 1958 with the intensified introduction of courses in Industrial Design. It is interesting to note that design, in both East and West, was discovered for its economic benefits, not for its cultural benefits.

The teaching of design has been largely oriented towards the aesthetic/ ethical functionalism of the renowned Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm. Deliberately functional

product design with a leaning towards the *Modernität des Dauerhaften* (Vittorio Lampugnani) - i.e. lasting modernity as opposed to short-lived, post-modern trends - has, right up to the present day, been an essential mainstay of the Faculty of Design. In addition to Industrial Design, Process Design, Communication Design, Fashion Design and Interior Design, the Faculty of Design embraces certain specialized courses of study which are today hardly offered by any other college of university status, e.g. Toy and Teaching Aid Design, Ceramic/Glass Design and Textile Design.

Once the arts and crafts school had finally become a »College of Industrial Design« in 1958, the practical teaching of design was henceforth accompanied by theoretical research and academic reflections on such fundamental aspects of design as form and function, ethics and semiotics. The annually held symposia discussed current and critical themes of industrial design, its changing functions, its ever-widening scope of application. Design came to be understood as the process of creating a »difficult whole«, this being not only conditioned by different functional relationships but also formed by meanings and references generated by a complex fusion of understanding and doing. The aim of industrial design should not be merely the »endowment« of materials and machines with meaning through art, but must also meet the needs of our information and media-minded society. In a world which is gradually changing from concrete to virtual reality, the image has gained more and more importance for the designer. Art and design have an equal part to play in the new evaluations and interpretations of the »iconic turn«, a phenomenon which brings to the fore - and to a great extent - the vast dimensions within which drafts and forms can be effectively deployed.

Now taking over from a synthesis of the arts in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* sense is a different multitude of free and useful art forms, many of them utilizing new technologies and media. They are art processes that have yet to try their hand at collaboration and crossover, and it is not until this has happened that they will be able to transform the utopias of the long story of Burg Giebichenstein into a laboratory of draft culture and to deconstruct these utopias for the future. It is in both art and design that the innovative creative process is today understood as something that operates interactively, socio-politically, as a magnetic field of effects, resonances and virtualities which afford, as a challenge, new possibilities of exercising our intuition, of playing, of remembering, and even of making mistakes, and which reach beyond the respective work of art or design towards dynamic action, for it is an undeniable fact that the concepts of art and design have been fundamentally extended and today demand completely open structures.

In its collaboration with the Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg and other universities, the Burg Giebichenstein sees itself confronted by new social, cultural and educational debates in consequence of the urgent need for modernization. The rapid developments in information and communication technology have given rise to new definitions and parameters in every conceivable area, whether education, the labour market, urban development, careers, organization - everything is in a state of flux. These processes are currently the object of extreme scrutiny, both theoretical and practical and from all angles: art-historical, culture-historical, philosophical, psychological and, last but not least, from the standpoint of the design theorist. The interrelations between theory and practice are also being analyzed: the differences and contradictions between the ideal notions of the theorist and the real conditions of actual practice constitute the training ground for the ultimate leap out of the boiling water.

The curiosity cabinets of Early Modern Age with their collections of automatons, works of art, scientific objects, technical instruments and antiques of every description, showed how the boundaries between art, science and technology could be transcended and the world explored via visual and mental processes of association. The first art academies testify to those complex approaches to the world. The computer age opens up new possibilities of bringing all these different fields together once more. It may, for example, direct this leaps out the boiling water towards a draft culture of new experiments, ideas, sketches and works. This, in conjunction with the arts and sciences, poses a completely new challenge, for nothing is more lifeless than a boiled to-death frog.

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