WdKA Commercial Practices Position Paper

In times of transition...
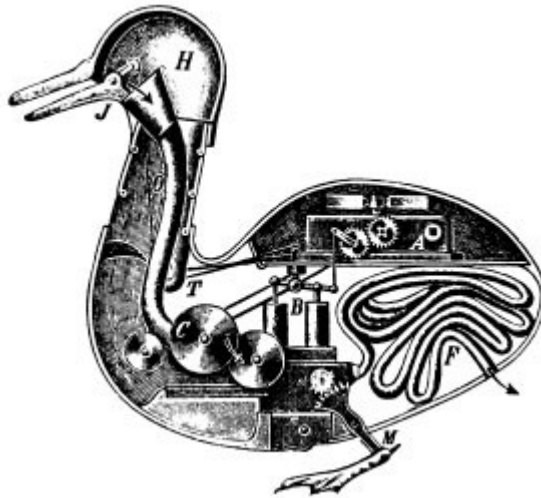
Focus

The main focus of the WdKA Commercial Practices graduation profile is to help artists and designers materialise and contribute to alternative modes of organisation and production based on strong ecological and cooperative/collaborative values. It seeks to reflect on, experiment and engage with such alternatives while bringing the urgency of the climate crisis and climate justice to art and design education, while remaining critical of technosolutionism, consumer activism, and the language of circularity and sustainability.

Background and Motivation

The Commercial Practices agenda is to explicitly transition from a classic entrepreneurial, exploitative, extractivist and uprooted star-centric understanding of art and design business, to a much more engaged, ethical, collective and meaningful contribution of artists and designers to new organisational and productive apparatuses spanning across multiple fields and sectors, and in which ecologies and economics in their various interpretations cannot be decoupled.

Are these still Commercial Practices though? Absolutely. Instead of business as usual, the specificity of the new Commercial Practices profile is to promote and experiment with alternative modes of organisation, design, publishing, dissemination, production and consumption that pratically engage with, and critically questions the notion of economic and environmental sustainability.

The world is changing faster than ever, and new forms of organisation and production are in dire need. To be fair, we are aware and recognize that this is a gigantic task that should have started yesterday. It is also a task for many other fields and sectors. The challenge for us is to understand and redefine the role of artists and designers in these times of transition. The task seems impossible because of the complex chain of interdependencies that are often ignored or obfuscated for sake of hiding exploitative and extractive practices, as well as streamlining or to maintain the illusion of eternal growth within systems relying on principles of linear economy. Yet we have to try to start unpacking these assembly lines and figure out what economic and environmental sustainability can mean, what are the limits and caveats, what it means to seek alternatives, to what, and what are the consequences of doing so.

If we want to reconsider how things are produced, and how services are offered, it also means that we urgently need to zoom out from the vertical integration of our respective art and design practices. It means we must include the critical investigation of: materials (origin, scarcity, extraction, energy), relationship between human and nonhuman beings and things (issues of biodiversity, working and living with water, energy, soil, solar, compost, wind), infrastructure (ICT, repair, alt production), labour (work ethics, accessibility, solidarity, supply chain transparency, working conditions abroad), intellectual property (free and open source software and hardware, post-free culture licenses), and alternative economic models (circular, regenerative, degrowth). Most importantly we need to acknowledge, students and teachers alike, the situatedness of such investigations. Regardless of how much we want to zoom out, we need to recognise that our own embedding in these existing systems of organisation and production will deeply affect and relativise our capacity to understand them critically, and how this will in turn impact the way we think of alternatives.

Questions

What new practical skills and constraints need to be taught and learned to materialise more sustainable art and design practices? How do they connect to material, resources, energy budget, relationship between human and nonhuman beings and things, infrastructures, labour, working conditions abroad, intellectual property and alternative economic models? What are the theoretical frameworks that can be used to contextualise and define what could be these new practical skills?

What qualities and specifities beside communication, illustration, and in general skills to raise awareness, do artist and designers have that could initiate or contribute to existing collective and collaborative multi-, trans-, and cross-disciplinary environmental projects, products and services? How will this affect the field of art and culture production, the cultural sector, and the creative industries in terms of policy and (re-)framing the role of art and design academies?

How can commercial artistic and design practices concerned with environmentalism be taught and practiced critically at a time where greenwashing, co-option, and appropriation of ecological discourses are omnipresent? What forms of literacy and skills are needed to navigate such minefield and differentiate actual paradigm shifts from marketing, at a time where everything presents itself as green, open, inclusive and sustainable?

- What are the social, cultural, and economic dynamics that could help redefine and reinvent art and design work under heavy environmental constraints? What sort of new design and making opportunities could raise from working with fewer material resources, computational limits, recycling, re-purposing? How can we design for longetivity, dissassembly, and descent? For instance what is the role of aesthetics in investigating societal issue as well as sprouting, informing, and sustaining societal changes?

What does it mean to make a living from art and design pratices in these times of transition? What are the perspectives offered and how do we integrate and effectively address the issues of precarity, inclusivity, accessibility, and ethics in the workplace, within the cultural sector, and the creative industries in general? What are the economic and legal entities the most adequante to implement other modes of organisation, management in relation to these issues?

Topics of Interest and Research

- art and design practices in relation to degrowth and collapsology
- system thinking and ecological economics applied to art and design practices
- alternative (micro)economic systems/models in art/design/publishing
- collaboration, cooperation and collective practices within microenterprise and coop
- (post-)free and open source software, hardware, and licensing
- resilient and less extractive computer technology and networked infrastructure
- creative design with extreme material, carbon and energy constraints
- collective care, work and labour ethics in the creative industries
- transition, regenerative, circularity and beyond, gambiarra and repair culture (engagement and critique)
- multi-, trans-, and cross-disciplinary projects beyond the cultural sector and the creative industries

Implementation and Minors

While it is not reasonable and expected from artists and designers to become experts in all the topics discussed so far, we believe that a generalist approach to these topics will create nevertheless an opportunity to reach out and initiate collaborations beyond the limited scope of the creative industries. For this reason, we train the Commercial Practices students to view the world in systems, where understanding our interdependence on each other is essential to question and bring situated change of various scales and forms. To teach our students to both recognize the aspects of the very large, and to engage with and modify the very small, we rely on three minors, that function as three lenses to allow the "zooming in and out" of these systems: Futures & Presence, Materials & Systems, and Contexts & Situatedness. Each lens provides a unique way of understanding the systems present in the world today, and create opportunities to make the necessary interventions, as well as to contribute to a future in which our decisions—and their long-term implications—are guided by alternative economic models in which the understandings of value is redefined based on social, cultural, and environmental criteria.

Materials & Systems

This lens focuses on the importance of combining a systems view of the world with an understanding of materiality. Every product is the output of a system, every lived moment is intertwined with systems. Indeed, everything is a system, from a biome to a mobile phone. Although this has always been the case, the connectivity of systems has spread wider and deeper than ever. Contemporary challenges seek a holistic approach. Similarly, though we may think of digital interactions as being immaterial, the cloud is simply a computer somewhere else, and internet traffic would be impossible without undersea cables. Even the immaterial is material. And the way we perceive materiality is shifting. Because of (digital) technology, the discussion about the vitality of materiality is opened. Do we design with 'passive' (or dull) matter? Adjusting or reconsidering our mindset about the materials we design with, may have great impact on our current way of living. For instance, will patterns of consumption change? The Materials & Systems lens encourages a view of the world that zooms in to the smallest component or interaction, and out to the effects, both intentional and accidental.

Context & Situatedness

The Context and Situatedness lens represents tools and approaches to interrogate emerging discourses of contemporary culture, identity, and community that are technologically entangled and globally networked. Design, understood as a conceptual and professional practice, is a critical tool, an antidote, to the normative stability and hierarchy of everyday contexts. This lens explores how we 'make sense' of such contexts. It observes and analyses this meshwork of entangled, intertextual discourse as an ongoing process where cultural heritage is confronted with new tools, practices, perspectives, and ideas. This perspective is able to review how meaning is distributed across ecosocial semiotic networks or socio-technical systems within specific local practices (and a respective space, time, culture, etc.). In doing so it contests the static symbolism of linguistic-centric models and patriarchy imbued within postmodern ideas of metaphor and external realities. Output from this approach is understood as the production of situated knowledges, often in the development of literal 'tools' that are required to contest current realities or develop possible futures.

Futures & Presence

We live in a time of multiple and complex global crises. These wicked problems are daunting, however inaction is not an option if we wish to secure more equitable and desirable futures. Artists and designers can play an active role in global collaborative problem-solving by creating scenarios and stories which can inspire movements, template new ways of being, and trigger action. The Futures & Presence lens offers students the opportunity to develop, imagine, and communicate possibilities for our collective future. Students develop methods for fore-sighting and futures-oriented storytelling, creating compelling visions of our possible lives in every way: our cultures, cities, bodies, homes, foods, technologies, governance models, and more. By developing and sharing our speculative visions and prototypes, Futures & Presence students learn how to contribute much-needed creativity to processes of change.