

Thinking Transversally: Art Education and New Ecologies

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Theorists of new Materialism or of a related or ecological thinking are currently emphasizing a different worldview or new ecological cartographies. They aim at revising our relationship to nature and to manifold non-humans or more than humans and at striving for a better understanding of our entangled embeddedness in the world, which is meant to help us deal with the threatening and multifaceted ecological crisis. Those more recent theoretical approaches also provide an interesting starting point for reconsidering the education of artists and designers in the Anthropocene. But instead of referring to them today I would like to draw once again on Felix Guattari's groundbreaking text *The Three Ecologies* and connect it to an interdisciplinary study program I am heading at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. As you know, in *The Three Ecologies* Guattari elaborated and pursued Gregory Bateson's elemental ideas about an Ecology of the Mind and formulated the central theses of an ecological thinking, which is still foundational for contemporary scholars of new ecological or new materialist approaches – like Timothy Morton, Rosi Braidotti or Erich Hörl to name just a few.

What makes re-reading Guattari's essay in the context of this symposium so interesting is that, first of all, for the French psychoanalyst and philosopher the multilayered social, political and environmental crises are only solvable when considered to be interconnected, and that we have to learn to think "transversally" in order "to comprehend the interactions between ecosystems, the mechanosphere and the social and individual Universes of reference."¹ Furthermore, and most notably, he focuses on two aspects that are of special relevance in the field of Art and Design Education: on the process of subjectivation and on artistic or aesthetic practice, to which Guattari confers a key position of transversality with respect to other Universes of value.²

¹ Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London, New Brunswick: The Athlone Press, 2000), p. 43. First published in France 1989 (*Le trois ecologies*, Editions Galilée).

² See also Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis. An ethico-aesthetic Paradigm*, Bloomington (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 105. First published in France 1992 (*Chaosmose*, Editions Galilée).

“The only true response to the ecological crisis is on a global scale, provided that it brings about an authentic political, social and cultural revolution, reshaping the objectives of the production of both material and immaterial assets”, states Guattari in *The Three Ecologies*, and adds: “Therefore this revolution must not be exclusively concerned with visible relations of force on a grand scale, but will also take into account molecular domains of sensibility, intelligence and desire.” Here Guattari adverts decidedly to mental domains and subjectivity, which in his opinion are currently captured and insidiously penetrated by the conformist ideologies of a morbidly diffused world-integrated capitalism and standardisation, and manipulation through the mass media. That’s why a kind of revolution of mentalities and subjectivation has to take place first and foremost, whereby they cease investing in a hollow productivism and regain the potential to foster a rebuilding of human relations and of the relationship to the environment. In this connection the French philosopher advocates cultivating dissensus, emphasizing singularization and subjectivation, which potential vectors “run counter to the ‘normal order of things’.”³ These processes of subjectivation should follow an ecological praxis striving to scout out the “intensive given” – meaning “what we are actually capable of becoming”⁴ –, which invokes other intensities to form new existential configurations.”⁵

Following Guattari the very foundations and central parameters for such individual but also collective processes of subjectivation that “completely exceed the limits of individualization, stagnation, identificatory closure”, opening up instead “on all sides to the socius, but also to the machinic Phylum, to techno-scientific Universes of reference, to aesthetic worlds (...)”⁶ is provided by the multifaceted movement of ecosophy. Guattari designates this ecosophy as a new, at once applied and theoretical, speculative, ethico-political and aesthetic perspective, mediating between the three ecologies. Ecosophy is characterized through transversal thinking, or rather analysing and actualising transversal connections between the different realms – through a transversality that calls into question “disciplinary boundaries” and “the solipsistic closure of Universes of value.”⁷

³ Guattari 2000 (footnote 1), p. 45.

⁴ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 2013, p. 92.

⁵ Guattari 2000 (footnote 1), p. 45.

⁶ Ibid, p. 68.

⁷ See Guattari 1995 (footnote 2), p. 117.

Moreover, according to Guattari the logic of this ecosophy, the logic of this transversal perspective and practice resembles the practice of the artist who starts over and over again from scratch and always has to invent himself, steadily taking into account uncertainties and changing conditions. He elaborates: “This new ecosophical logic (...) resembles the manner in which an artist may be led to alter his work after the intrusion of some accidental detail, an event-incident that suddenly makes his initial project bifurcate, making it drift far from its previous path, however certain it had once appeared to be.”⁸ Guattari conceives artistic practice as an aesthetic practice, which does not withdraw to the secure terrains of established theories and models for resolution, but always positions itself anew, confronting continually changing conditions, experimenting with practices that open up existential territories instead of letting them be petrified and trapped in repetitions. In *Chaosmose* he specifies: “The incessant clash of the movement of art against established boundaries (...), its propensity to renew its materials of expression and the ontological texture of the percepts and affects it promotes brings about if not a direct contamination of other domains at the least a highlighting and a re-evaluation of the creative dimensions that traverse all of them.”⁹ In connection with such ideas Guattari also not only underscores the importance of care organisations and educational institutions for an ecosophical remodelling of reality due to their participation in the processes of subjectivation, but likewise emphasises the need for permanently revising and reinventing those institutions.

cx centre for interdisciplinary studies

What kind of conclusions for art and design education could we now draw from Guattari’s assertions concerning an ecosophical transversality, a resistant subjectivity taking shape in such transversal entanglements of relations and the key role of artists for a transversal thinking and acting in this world of manifold ecological crisis? As already mentioned I would like to discuss this question by means of a study program, which I founded at the academy of Fine Arts in the winter term 2011/12 – the program of the cx centre for interdisciplinary studies.¹⁰ I would like to say in advance that I consider the cx program to be an affirmative experiment to create a curriculum to foster resistant individual subjectivations and a transversal perspective and

⁸ Guattari 2000 (footnote. 1), p. 52.

⁹ Guattari 1992 (footnote 2) p.106.

¹⁰ The programm is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

practice in the sense of Guattari. On the other hand, however, the program – especially with regard to its interconnectedness with the wider social domain – also raises issues that demand critically reflecting on and supplementing some of Guattari’s theses.

All of the courses at the cx-program are designed to reach across classes and departments. This means that the program is open to students from all free art classes as well as to students of art pedagogics and interior design and the Master students of “architecture and arts” and “visual design and therapy.” The teaching at the cx follows changing annual themes, building on current artistic, academic and social discourses and incorporating lecturers and guest professors from various disciplines. The program is structured in such a way that it always starts with a lecture series in the winter term exploring the annual theme and its main questions from the perspective of different disciplines. Furthermore the lecture series is concurrently accompanied by an art theoretical, a media theoretical and a design theoretical seminar by my colleagues Marietta Kesting, Karianne Fogelberg and me. Each lecture series integrates proponents from different artistic and scientific disciplines and is conceived in such a way that most of its panels, which are dedicated to a special question or aspect of the annual theme, are shared by one agent from the various artistic disciplines and one scholar or theorist. At first all the scholars and artists present their works or research findings regarding the panel issues before they then engage in a dialogue with each other. The summer term focuses on the practical project work. For this we have the possibility of inviting an artistic guest professor whose teaching and practice-oriented work with the students is also related to our annual theme.

The objective of the whole program is not only to pick up on and enlarge upon very recent themes that are likewise relevant in artistic, academic and socio-political terms and to closely tie together theory and practice, but also to introduce the students to other areas of knowledge, methods of research and ways of thinking, and to complement the existing artistic education with further interdisciplinary teaching. Artistic practice herein is understood and reflected as a distinct form of cognition and knowledge production.

The previous annual themes of the cx program comprise:

Power of Material / Politics of Materiality (2012/13) bringing into an early dialogue the reassessment of matter and material phenomenon in art, design and architecture with the cultural and social studies approaches of New Materialism. In the framework of this annual theme we discussed and tried out a different understanding of material phenomena and a different interaction with material accentuating its momentum and agency. And we discussed how a new conception and reconfiguration of our very understanding of matter “are prerequisites for any plausible account of coexistence and its conditions in the twenty-first century,” as Diana Coole would put it.¹¹

Fragile Identities (2013/14), the second annual theme, was dedicated to the subject forms and processes of subjectivation in current situations of socio-political upheavals and in advanced capitalism. In theory and practice we discussed the fatigued and commodified self of our biopolitical society and an unstable fragile self being in a constant process of change due to precarious social conditions. And we explored the possible injuries but also the potentials of fragile subject forms, which might also be rendered capable of relating in various ways exactly because of their openness.

The third annual theme **The present of the future** (2014/15) asked which means and strategies artists and scholars pursue today to gain a scope of action for shaping alternative futures. How they could create potentials for change and for imagining alternative futures beyond modernistic idealism and romanticist projections.

Last year we investigated the increasing interest of Western societies in spirituality, mysticism and magical practices under the heading **Real Magic** (2015/16). We focused especially on the magical as a possible form of thinking and practicing resistance as well as a perspective or form of consciousness, conveying a more holistic worldview and principles of the participation and connection of things.

And in the framework of the current annual theme **Hybrid Ecologies** (2016/17) we, in cooperation with the chair of philosophy | aesthetic theory of the Munich academy, are examining the concept of a new general ecology and an ecological thinking. We seek to explore the political and social effect that a rethinking of the collective in

¹¹ Diana Coole, Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialism,” in: *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 2.

ecological terms may provoke – an understanding of our contemporary world as a multi-layered and multi-dimensional nexus of reciprocities between living processes, technological and media practices, the natural and the artificial. Not least we ask which consequences the contemporary notion of ecology might entail for artistic and design practices.

So the study program of the cx is trying to initiate and negotiate forms of transversality on different levels, not only by means of the program's structure, the specific curriculum building, but also by means of the annual themes and their concrete thematic focus. In this respect the structure and the content of the program complete each other and are mutually dependent. Especially the lecture series, with its decided search for connection between the different artistic and scientific disciplines and their possible reciprocal inspirations, could be considered one important tool for fostering an inter-monadic transversality in the sense of Guattari, "calling into question disciplinary boundaries, the solipsistic closure of Universes of value prevalent today in a number of domains."¹² Furthermore each of the annual themes seeks to intertwine "scientific, political, environmental and mental ecologies" due to the interdisciplinary perspective and to establish "transversal junctions between the political, the ethical and the aesthetic".¹³ At the same time transversality and relationality are themselves constantly recurring themes – specially in the framework of the current annual theme *Hybrid Ecologies*. Since this year the cx is also awarding a grant for a student project carried out in collaboration with a scholar or practitioner from another discipline, encouraging a transdisciplinary approach.

I have to qualify, however, that transversality, as Guattari understands it, is "always to be conquered through a pragmatics of existence."¹⁴ In other words it is to be actualized via or through tangible operations, and manifests itself in existential processes. By way of contrast the transversality of the cx program is to a great extent confined to the protected space of the art school. Even if the program invests in closely tying together theoretical discourse and artistic practice, transversal thinking remains in a state of an experimental testing beyond social reality. But this need not be valued only negatively – to the contrary. Couldn't this experimental testing signify

¹² Guattari 1995 (footnote 2), p. 117.

¹³ Ibid., p. 134.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 125.

the working on “tools for transversality,” which Guattari mentioned and which might be conducted “even in the most extreme solitude” – the working on “toolkits composed of concepts, percepts and affects, which diverse publics will use at their convenience?”¹⁵ In a long-term perspective this experimental testing of transversal thinking and of a related aesthetic practice might furthermore – and I would determine this as a primary objective of the cx program – lead to a transformation of mentalities and to resistant processes of subjectivation. It might lead – at first of course primarily among the students – to a transformation of the “molecular domains of sensibility, intelligence and desire,”¹⁶ which Guattari considers to be so important for an “authentic, political, social and cultural revolution” on a global scale.

Versus a mobilised artist

Guattari’s philosophy offers several arguments for legitimizing and further establishing similar study programs. I would just like to amplify my present explanations by closing with one critical remark or supplement to Guattari’s thoughts. It relates to the key position for transversality that Guattari bestows on the arts, and you might have already realised that I haven’t elaborated on this idea further in connection to art education up to now. (You might even ask if it isn’t a paradox to call for an art education program fostering transversal thinking, when Guattari confers to the arts a key position for transversality). The reason for this is that I would first like to specify and reflect critically on Guattari’s notion of artistic practice. Because the artistic or aesthetic practice Guattari considers to be central for his ecology – and this is very important to highlight – seems **not** to correspond to our common institutionalized forms of art and design. In *Chaosmosis* he acknowledges: “It might also be better here to speak of a proto-aesthetic paradigm, to emphasise that we are not referring to institutionalised art, to its works manifested in the social field, but to a dimension of creation in a nascent state, perpetually in advance of itself, its power of emergence subsuming the contingency and hazards of activities that bring immaterial Universes into being.”¹⁷ I would like to underpin this late confinement with regard to institutionalised art and give it an even wider scope by referring to Isabel Stengers and Philippe Pignarre’s ideas about the mobilised scientist in *Capitalist Sorcery*, and

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 129 and 130.

¹⁶ Guattari 2000 (footnote 1), p. 28.

¹⁷ Guattari 1995 (footnote 2), pp. 101–102.

arguing that there is also a mobilised artist. The mobilised scientist for Pignarre and Stengers – mobilisation by the way designates the contrary of learning¹⁸ – is a scientist whose practice has rendered him or her vulnerable to being pressed into the service of capitalism and its construction of “infernal alternatives.”¹⁹ It is a scientist whose professional certainties about what is the right question to ask, “can lead him or her to adopt a frighteningly dismissive stance with regard to anything that falls outside this position.”²⁰ This scientist is only following his own paradigms, concepts and values, which he regards as abstract universality, and is therefore at risk of losing sight of concrete situations. Especially because of this blindness and a strict adherence to his own disciplinary dogmas and paradigm, the mobilised scientist supports and assists the capitalist demonization of alternatives aiming for the transformation of certain situations and tangible conditions. I would like to argue that there is also a mobilisation of institutionalized art and design that is likewise at risk of assisting the capitalist demonization of alternatives and might be captured in it. A mobilised artist (as well as other mobilised agents of the art operating system) slavishly follows the dogmas, rules and values of the art world, measuring success primarily according to sales volumes on the art market or the number of participations in big exhibitions. A mobilized artist is similar to the mobilized scientist imbued by professional certainties, whose questions and aesthetic enunciations are the right ones and “can lead him or her to adopt a frighteningly dismissive stance with regard to anything that falls outside this position.” The question I would like to pose in this connection, however, is whether engaging with other disciplinary perspectives and measurements of values, whether nourishing transversal thinking counteracts exactly such a mobilisation of institutionalised art by subverting dogmatic stances. It seems to me that we could call forth exactly the artistic quality Guattari considers to be so important for an ecosophical perspective by means of transversality, of a new ecological thinking: a quality of an ongoing experimental practice, opening up our existential territories instead of letting them petrify in repetition. I would therefore like to conclude with the thesis that not every artistic practice, but especially an artistic practice inspired and exercised by transversal thinking beyond the dogmas of an

¹⁸ Philippe Pignarre, Isabel Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery. Breaking the spell* (Palgrave Macmillen, Hampshire, New York 2011), p. 21.

¹⁹ Andrew Goffey, "Introduction: On the Witch's Broomstick", in: *Ibid.*, p. xiii

²⁰ *Ibid.*

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established capitalised art system could be considered to play a key role for an ecosophical transformation of our recent conditions.