

SPINNING TRIANGLES: IGNITION OF A SCHOOL OF DESIGN

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C O N C E P T

If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it. We would be affected by it as by a cause–natural or genetic. One always inherits from a secret–which says ‘read me, will you ever be able to do so?’

Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 1994¹

The now is a convulsion. A panicked, hyper-mediatised, hyper-shared, hyper-obscuring, hyper-real, hyper-public frenzy that grabs institutions and individuals alike. A collectivity that sees a wave of man-made problems overtake us from behind; a past over-rolling us, turning seemingly stable structures (seemingly stable at least for 1% of the world) upside down and inside out. The side effects, blind consequences of all too many masterplans and “progress”-promising initiatives and exploitations come rushing towards us, while we are all, individually and collectively, struggling to find a future, any kind of future, and a future for “all of us.”

It is in this “now” that voices talk from the past. Prophetically, with clairvoyance, spanning across centuries:

His [the Angel of History’s] face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. [...] The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm.

Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, 1940²

This much cited quote by Walter Benjamin is an epiphany, a concentration of meaning-combinations from all sorts of ages and all sorts of geographies. In just a few words, he was able to describe with such intensity, accuracy and foresight, what “western” modernity does, relies on, believes in and on which myths it is built. This epiphany has many sources, but had a culmination point from which it stemmed.

It takes reference to an angel, to be more precise, to a drawing of an angel: *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee. Conceived in 1920, it had been in Walter Benjamin’s hands for two decades and had been carefully watched. It took twenty years until the creation of a Bauhaus master, the above mentioned Paul Klee, started to “talk.”

And it is in this “now” that actions act from the past. Into the future, with possibilities, spanning across centuries:

Together let us desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will one day rise toward heaven from the hands of a million workers like the crystal symbol of a new faith.

Walter Gropius, *Program of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar*, 1919³

Those are the words of another Walter, Walter Gropius, in the founding document, also called “Manifesto,” of a school of design that would become the epitome of lived, created, loved and hated, welcomed and imposed Modernism: the Bauhaus. The typically modern “pioneering spirit,” fed on a utopian “belief” in a future of “unity,” stands in stark contrast with the dystopic vision of Walter Benjamin, where “unity” seems to be built only on one common denominator: an inescapable, linear pull and an exponentially growing “sky-high rubble-heap.”

Despite the contrast, one cannot overlook the deep connection. In fact, both utterances are affiliated. Both are children of their time, yet also father and son, mother and daughter. As mutually dependent constructs, they characterize imminent and conflictual energies that make up “Modernity”–a modernity that found its aesthetic expression in what is now known as “Modernism,” and carries these impulses in its form-taking.

We, as grand-children, no matter which part of the world we are from, were most likely born into a “Bauhaus-world.” We are its “heirs,” whether we want it or not. We can therefore neither neglect the positive achievements that the outpourings of this school

¹ Derrida, J. 2006 (1st pub. 1994), *Spectres of Marx*. Routledge. London
² Benjamin, W. 1940, *On the Concept of History*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I:2. Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1974. Translation: Dennis Redmond, 04.08.2001. www.arts.yorku.ca/soci/barent/wp-content/uploads/2008/10/benjaminconcept_of_history1.pdf

³ Gropius, W. 1919, *Program of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar*. In: Wingler, H. M. 1980 (1st pub. 1978) *The Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin, Chicago*. MIT Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts)

created, nor deny its complicity with the destructive forces of Modernity and Modernism.⁴

But it is in this split, between these two poles, between a founding moment and a “catastrophe,” that our questioning needs to start, where we need to sharpen our ears. As “heirs,” 100 years after the founding moment, we need to listen to resonances. They are high-pitched, and low-leveled, with a nauseating base, omnipresent and unbelievably loud. Because “Bauhaus” seems to carry so many voices and pasts,⁵ seems to be everywhere and in everything, that its echoes are far from building a harmonious and clear-cut composition, which could allow for easy listening. Our “now” is pregnant with its past and populated with its many-headed and many-handed children. For better or worse. One cannot be quite sure. But it is undeniable that the Bauhaus was successful, in the sense that it fitted the “storm” “which we call progress” (Benjamin, see above.)

If we try to listen in more carefully to the founding moment, we can recognise that Walter Gropius was hitting the nerve of his time. Not only by using the kind of hyperbolic language en vogue at the beginning of the twentieth century, but also by daring a bold move that met an urgent social, political and economic need. He responded to the weighing questions that industrialization and post-war disorientation pressed on the public with the vision of an army of new practitioners that could provide solutions to rapidly changing daily lives, as well as economic challenges and solidifying modern conditions. At the core of this manifesto, and in the way the school unfolded its practice, one finds a common question: In these new conditions, how do we want to live, individually and collectively? And inevitably from there: what are the masterplans that we can propose for “a society,” as “we” envision it?

If we were to take up this founding moment and its central question, what consequences would this have in the “now,” i.e. the “now” of its heirs? How does a space like S A V V Y Contemporary–The Laboratory of Form-Ideas, with its eight years of questioning the

existing power structures and the structural racism inherent to our societies and educational systems, respond to the central question of “what kind of future, and what kind of future for ‘us,’ i.e. ‘all of us’”? How would it further its experience as a “performative” space to act against it? If we would postulate a School of Design, 100 years after the Bauhaus, from which place and through which gesture?

The answer is: From the “sky-high rubble-heap” of history. Through the gesture of spinning the triangle, flipping the hourglass; i.e. setting a seemingly stable, hierarchised form into motion, speeding it up, changing its outline, dizzying its content, challenging its conception of present, past and future.

Because we know, as others have also stated,⁶ that the starting point needs to be made beyond established structures, from scratch, with an agenda that dares to think “progress” and “future” beyond their “western” conceptions. Meaning: by leaping forwards-backwards and throwing that “sky-high rubble-heap” in front of us. Because this rubble-heap is physically real. It has not disappeared to some distant past, forever behind that “Angel of History.” It has just been consciously kept at a distance, somewhere else, somewhere “other.” It is just not located in the metropolitan centres of the geopolitical West, not where the so called “creative industries” are located, where the apparent “idea hubs” and “future labs” find their settings. The rubble-heap has been outsourced, left to be dealt with by “others”, who, in fact, are “us,” i.e. “all of us.”

Recognizing this has consequences. Let us make another Walter speak, Walter D. Mignolo:

The overarching, and necessary, concept of Coloniality/Modernity implies the need, indeed, the strong need, for building macronarratives from the perspective of coloniality. [...] Macronarratives from the perspective of coloniality are not the counterpart of world or universal history, but a radical departure from such global projects. They are neither (or at least not only) revisionist narratives nor narratives that intend to tell a different truth but, rather, narratives geared toward the search for a different logic. [...] [In order to] change the terms of the conversation as well as its content (persuaded by Trouillot’s insistence on the issue) to displace the “abstract universalism” of modern epistemology and world history, while leaning toward an alternative to totality conceived as a network of local histories and multiple local hegemonies. Without such macronarratives told

4 One may look into Junichiro Tanizaki’s essay *In Praise of Shadows*, to get an insight to the consequences in the case of Japan: “It is on occasions like this that I always think how different everything would be if we in the Orient had developed our own science. Suppose for instance that we had developed our own physics and chemistry: would not the techniques and industries based on them have taken different form, would not our myriads of everyday gadgets, our medicines, the products of our industrial art—would they not have suited our national temper better than they do? [...] If my complaints are taken for what they are, however, there can be no harm in considering how unlucky we have been, what losses we have suffered, in comparison with the Westerner. [...] We would have gone ahead very slowly, and yet it is not impossible that we would one day have discovered our own substitute for the trolley, the radio, the airplane of today.” Tanizaki, J. 1977, *In Praise of Shadows*, Leete’s Island Books, Maine. pp. 7

5 cf. Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin (ed.) 2010, *bauhaus global*, Neue Bauhausbücher Band 3, Gebr. Mann Verlag, Berlin. cf. Also Bittner, R., Rhombert, K. (eds.) 2013, *Das Bauhaus in Kalkutta. Eine Begegnung kosmopolitischer Avantgarden*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern. cf. Also Marion von Osten 2013, *The ‘Arab village’ of Stuttgart*: “It must therefore be emphasised [...] that not only Asian influences, such as Japanese light-weight design or Muche and Itten’s interest in the Mazdanian doctrine (a Western understanding of an Eastern health movement), but also the craftsmanship and architecture of Africa had a great effect on the artistic identity of modernism. The African Chair or other objects from the Weimar phase of the Bauhaus use a distinctive design vocabulary that openly articulates that it has learned from the craftsmanship traditions of the south, and intends to continue doing so. This translation of transformation of ‘pre-modern’ vernacular design traditions into modernism itself is a somewhat neglected field of study, which will reveal many new insights in the years to come. [...] In the context of the current debate on transcultural modernity it is therefore clear that modernism does indeed have its sources, that is, it is not the invention of European artists who merely interpreted non-European art in order to challenge the canon of Western arts, as many of the theories of Primitivism have maintained. Rather the appropriation of processes of modernism first became possible in the specific context of European colonialism, which presented the infrastructure and cultural framework in which these appropriation processes became possible” pp. 65

6 cf. Pedro J. S. Vieira de Oliveira and Kodwo Eshun “For Eshun, Western-centric theories can only offer a means to talk about themselves and hence to speculate on their projections of what the future could, should, or would be – a ‘research and development department within a futures industry that dreams of the prediction and control of tomorrow’” (Pedro J. S. Vieira de Oliveira, *Design at the Earview: Decolonizing Speculative Design Through Sonic Fiction*, in: *Design Issues* Vol. 32 N°2, MIT Press Journals, MIT Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts)). Quote by Kodwo Eshun, *Further Considerations of Afro-futurism*, CR: *The New Centennial Review* 3, N°2, 2003: 291

from the historical experiences of multiple local histories (the histories of modernity/coloniality), it would be impossible to break the dead end against which modern epistemology [...] [has] framed hegemonic forms of knowledge.” [...] “Thus, the geopolitic of knowledge becomes a powerful concept [...] to legitimize border epistemologies emerging from the wounds of colonial histories, memories, and experiences.⁷

If we are to follow his argument, “macronarratives from the perspective of coloniality,” or “border-thinking,” would allow to “break the dead end” of “hegemonic forms of knowledge.” If we think this further, and think it in the realm of design, we come close to the postulate that a call for audible “border-thinking,” needs to be accompanied by a call for “border-making” to enter the stage. On its own terms.

S A V V Y Contemporary is well aware of the neo-colonial bias of the structures we live in. It has spent many years analyzing this condition and acting against it. Modernity is per se colonial (“Modernity, let me repeat, carries on its shoulders the heavy weight and responsibility of coloniality.”⁸) and Modernism is therefore deeply entangled with it. The interplay between colonialism and education has been analyzed by a few, in some cases also in regards to aesthetic education⁹ as well as the connection between design and colonialism, most prominently in the field of architecture.¹⁰ The fact that “The colonies were there to be mined for their raw materials, both literally and aesthetically,”¹¹ has not reached the consciousness of the wider public in the geopolitical West yet and is still said to be “a somewhat neglected field of study,”¹² but has at least peripherally entered discussions within Design circles, and is certainly an unquestioned and lived truth in the Global South and its diasporas.

Yet, design education, discourse and practice is still largely dominated by western design principles and philosophies. Too often even the hybridity at the very core of modern design is neglected in design studies and design histories, despite efforts being made.¹³ “Border voices” are often ignored all together, and rarely enter the stage on their own terms.

But it is exactly those “border voices” that one needs to listen to with all urgency. Because indeed the “sky-high rubble-heap” has been dumped on these door-steps,

if not in these living rooms. Has been experienced on bodies, and transported into histories and stories, into philosophies and practices of everyday life.

The conclusion seems inevitable. If S A V V Y Contemporary repeats the founding moment of 1919, a school needs to be created, one that transfers border epistemologies into making.

We propose a new design school to enter the life-world, a new prototype, that can spark a new kind of knowledge transfer, capable of generating new principles, and therefore new forms of making, everyday life, and co-living.

For this to happen, we spin triangles, and flip the hourglass, we reverse geographies and turn import-export relations upside down. So the first question is: Where should such a school find its spark?

Where else than in a country where the “sky-high rubble-heap” of history has amassed millions of death of which six Millions are counted in recent Modernity alone, meaning the last twenty years (1996–2016)? We are not talking about the victims to colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade, the holocaust, or other tragedies in former decades, but about the present, knowing full well that these numbers are euphemisms, and have indeed increased in the last two years. We are talking about the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where the mining of minerals to feed our electronic apparatuses goes hand in hand with the slaughtering of an entire region of this earth, “now.”

The location we want to propose is Kinshasa, the capital of this vast country.

Here, actors of the extremely lively and thriving art and design scene will dedicate themselves to the founding of a school. A school that challenges common formats and pedagogies. From scratch, on their own terms, corresponding to their philosophies, ideas, histories and needs.

The first spinning, reversing movement takes place in Dessau, where the famous world heritage site of the Bauhaus is situated. A movable, miniature version of the iconic workshop wing appears in the city in January 2019 to spark off questions and mirrorings, as irritations and bridges. This cloned smaller brother, sister, son or daughter of the imposing father/mother-figure is in fact a “Bauhaus-Wohnmaschine” (Bauhaus living machine) – a 12 square meter home, that also includes an exhibition space. The glass facade, constructed by students of FH Hildesheim, becomes a membrane that questions the private as well as the public, the visible as well as the invisible, property laws, biases and its own history. During one month in Dessau, the “Wohnmaschine” shape-shifts, emancipates itself, re-associates itself, responds to the actors and finds new places

7 Mignolo, W. D. 2012, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (1st pub. 2000), Princeton University Press, Princeton. pp. 22

8 See 7, p. 43

9 cf. Spivak, G. C. 2013, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge. Also cf. Mudimbe, V.Y. 1994, *The Idea of Africa*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis: “For the artist trained in colonial-era workshops and art schools, the curriculum there has been prescribed powerful reflexes and responses. Even in the most conservative [in the sense of conservatively “preserving” the “African spirit” of the artists] institutions, education meant a conversion, or at least an opening, to another cultural tradition. For all these artists, the organic reality of a modernity was embodied by the discourses, values, aesthetics, and exchange economy of colonialism.” p. 161

10 cf. conferences like *The Colonial Modern*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 23.10.–25.10.2008

11 Fiss, K. 2009, *Design in a Global Context: Envisioning Postcolonial and Transnational Possibilities*, Design Issues Vol. 25, MIT Press Journals, MIT Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts)

12 See 5, Marion von Osten

13 cf. a.o. Adamson, G., Riollo, G., Teasley S. (eds.) 2011, *Global Design History*, Routledge, London

for temporary settlement. The rummaging underbelly of this “living machine,” resonates all the way to Kinshasa, where the school finds its spark.

Here, an exchange platform for knowledge transfer between several actors from the Global South is initiated. The participants debate status quos, question solutions, talk about successes, failures, ideas, possibilities and impossibilities, conceive workshops and create proposals. They discuss the social and political climate, conditions of “now,” the practice of design and pedagogical formats. These contributions are conceived freely; as workshops, lectures, discussion rounds, walks, choreographies or whichever methodology seems suitable to their purposes. Bit by bit the idea and concept for a school of design emerges, whose form and format might surprise us more than we can currently imagine. The speculative frame of this project creates a space in which some assumptions are clear: it is not meant to be temporal, but to last and be lived. It is meant to be created for the context in which it emerged (Kinshasa) and will only be considered for “export” afterwards – the third spinning.

In this third reversal, the finalized “school” that might well become an “un-school” will be “exported” into new territories. Five “Meister” (if such structures will survive the spinning of the triangle) who conceived the school in Kinshasa, will start to organise their travels.

For practical reasons these “new territories” will have to be determined in advance. The first continent is Europe, the country Germany, the city Berlin and the space S A V V Y Contemporary–The Laboratory of Form-Ideas. From mid July until mid August 2019, this space will temporarily vanish to make place for a school of design, that does not yet have a name, nor a set frame of action or curriculum (also a structure that may not survive the spinning of the triangle). Here, the five actors will “teach” and “transfer knowledge,” here one will “unlearn” and “learn.” With forty students the yet unthinkable will be created: maybe even a new-conception of global reality, new ways of living everyday lives. Certainly a new form of sharing and co-living will be negotiated during the active existence of the school.

The infrastructure of studios and workshops in Berlin-Wedding and around S A V V Y Contemporary will serve as a cooperative base for students (to name one partner: Bildhauerwerkstatt im Kulturwerk des bbk). Every week, three public lectures, or in its widest sense “contributions” (performances, DJ-Sets etcetera) are held by practicing artists and designers from around the world. The school will have open days in which the public has access to the space and can potentially talk to students and staff. These open days can also be used by the students to present their work and work-in-progress.

In order to further these questions and engage in the fourth reversing movement, the infamous Hong Kong space Para Site will have the honour to host the

“Meister” and their teachings in October 2019 in order to initiate new perspectives for design practices and discourses within another, specific context.

We want the existence of this school to have far-reaching consequences: for a new kind of thinking and making, for triggering debates within design circles and beyond, for having an impact on the way design schools are run and thought about today. If one dreams far and wide, these may not be their only iteration, but just the first ones, pilote editions.

We hope to add not only our critical voice to this jubilee, to ravel not only in discussions about the Bauhaus’ relationship to coloniality, but to go beyond that. To perform an act in the “now,” conscious of this “now” and its inbred pasts, with a possibility to create from it, to propose solutions, another imaginary:

The world needs an epistemological change that will rearrange desires. Global contemporaneity requires it.” (p. 2), “[We need poets] capable of organizing other people’s habits” (p. 6) “If, however, this is only a ‘rearrangement of desire’ of the substitution of one habit for another through pedagogical sleight-of-hand, there will be no ability to recover that discovery for a continuity of epistemological effort. We must learn to do violence to the epistemo-epistemological difference and remember that this is what education “is,” and thus keep up the work of displacing belief onto the terrain of the imagination, attempt to access the epistemic (p. 10)

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, 2013 ¹⁴

T E X T Elsa Westreicher

¹⁴ Spivak, G. C. 2013, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge

MORE INFORMATION

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S A V V Y Contemporary – The laboratory of form-ideas is an art space, discursive platform, place for good talks, foods and drinks – a space for conviviality. S A V V Y Contemporary situates itself at the threshold of notions of the West and non-West, to understand and deconstruct them. S A V V Y Contemporary has realized a kaleidoscope of art exhibitions, performances, film screenings, lectures, concerts, readings, talks, dances. S A V V Y Contemporary has established a participatory archive on German colonial history, a performance arts documentation centre, a library, a residency program, as well as educational projects with schools. The art space engages in its neighborhood's history and socio-political realities which are entangled with the reflections and discourses of the project.

S A V V Y Contemporary is Elena Agudio Antonia Alampi Jasmina al-Qaisi Lynhan Balatbat-Helbock Bona Bell Marleen Boschen Federica Bueti Pia Chakraverti-Wuerthwein Olani Ewunnet Raisa Galofre Johanna Gehring Anna Jäger Kimani Joseph Laura Klöckner Cornelia Knoll Kelly Krugman Nathalie Mba Bikoro António Mendes Kamila Metwaly Wilson Mungai Arlette-Louise Ndakoze Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung Abhishek Nilamber Jeff Obiero Beya Othmani Elena Quintarelli Marleen Schröder Jörg-Peter Schulze Lema Sikod Lili Somogyi Jorinde Spletstößer Laura Voigt Elsa Westreicher

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