### **Workshop of Other Knowledge**

Aldje van Meer

Willem de Kooning Academy

**ABSTRACT**Are we providing art and design students the tools, the skills, and the technology they need?

Are we offering the right learning environment for them to be able to investigate and experiment with crucial phenomena of this time and age? Don’t we need to introduce students with new modes of making and seeing, and let them break away from the standard artistic toolset?

In this paper the role of the workshop within art and design education is being criticised.

It looks at how Bauhaus has had a great influence on the role of the workshop of today. It concludes that we need to reformulate skill education regarding technology with critical making as an integral part. We do this by proposing new pedagogical and educational spaces, the “Workshop of Other Knowledge,” in which new modes of making and designing by cross-, inter-, and transdisciplinary tools and instruments are used.

**Keywords:**

workshop, Bauhaus, technology,

skill education, making

As an art educator, I ask myself daily whether we are offering students the right tools, skills, and technology. Within this writing I would like to share my questions and struggle regarding the learning environment in which we address these tools, technology, and skills; namely, the workshop.

First, I would like to address the role of the workshop in relation to Bauhaus. Bauhaus will celebrate its centenary in 2019, and has had a great influence on the role of the workshop of today. Secondly, I would like to look at how current times resonate with the desires and attitude that shaped Bauhaus, and how it can inspire us to rethink the role of the workshop of tomorrow.

The Bauhaus responded to the effects of the “First Machine Age,” in which the machine took over handcraftsmanship, and artists and designers sought a new role within the junction of craft and industrial production. Bauhaus was responding to a world which had many insecurities. World War I had just finished, Germany was bankrupt, and there was great inflation.

In the context of all of this it was clear a new narrative was needed. In all this misery Bauhaus had a rather remarkable, positive approach; they developed a utopian vision to make a better world for all, through better designed objects and environments; they wanted to change the world by design.

Today we are experiencing the emergence of the “Second Machine Age,” wherein technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, and biotech are fundamentally changing the way we live. An age in which the boundaries between the physical, digital, and biological blur.

Maybe, in parallel to Bauhaus you could say, we also live in a time of big societal change and transformations. Along with the impact of technology there is ecological and political crisis, and we have migration issues. These are not just themes to be reflected upon, but they redefine the fundamentals of how artists and designers work. [[1]](#footnote-1)

At the Willem de Kooning Academy (WdKA), as at many other art schools, we are putting a lot of effort in looking for ways to connect these urgent topics to the practice of art and design education in the 21st century. In response to these developments we applied fundamental changes in our curricula, in order to make our education more relevant. Besides the major (disciplinary courses), WdKA adds elective projects. These projects introduce students to our three graduation profiles. We call them the Autonomous, Social, and Commercial Practices.[[2]](#footnote-2) In all three practices, students work on real-life, practical assignments which transcend the boundaries of their discipline. Within these educational programmes much effort is put into rethinking systems, notions of authorship, collaboration, and transdisciplinarity.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Another major change in the innovation of our education was our reinvention of the workshop.    
We saw a great divide between new art and design practices and our craft-oriented education within the workshop. We believed that “a changing society” also calls for new ways of making. New technologies not only alter the way we make things, they also influence the way we think about production.

So we upgraded the workshops and implemented the Stations.[[4]](#footnote-4) Within the Stations we are questioning the technology we teach by making room for new technologies and by reinventing old technologies. We are changing the workshop from a place for production and execution to a place where research can take place. Also we created an environment which allows more and intensive collaboration between teachers and technical staff.   
But despite successes, I feel we are still held back by the past. The division between the art professor and the technical staff working in the workshop seems to be more hard-coded in the DNA of the art school than we realised beforehand. Also the hierarchical (read: financial) divide between educational and technical staff holds us back when trying to fully integrate and innovate the education within the workshop.

To gain more insight into where we stand now and to be able to go further, it is good to look at history.  
I came across the work of Meredith Davis. She states:

For most of the 20th century, the primary role of design was to make things look and work better, to support the functional and emotional experiences of the consumers, through well-designed artefacts and places.[[5]](#footnote-5)

As Meredith Davis describes, this 20th-century, Bauhaus-based notion of an artefact-oriented view of design is very much applicable within today’s vision on the role of technology, and particularly the workshop within art education. In practice this means that there is the professor/tutor teaching in the classroom or studio and, in the workshops, technical staff instructs students in technologies to help them realise their “products.” Ofcourse the subjects and classes of professors have changed over time. Due to mass industrialisation and the outsourcing of production, a greater removal from the manufacturing process arose. Postmodern ideas were introduced, which related to this mass industry and consumerism. Art education developed a more “conceptual,” “critical,” and “theoretical” approach relating to design practices.

This led to the shared opinion that the designer/artist is responsible for the concept but not for the execution of the work, and that the technology or media that was used was inferior to the overall concept/message. Technology or material knowledge was considered less important and did not have a central role in the creative process; moreover, it was sometimes even seen as limiting the imagination. Due to this, the role of technology within art education in general has been neglected for decades. The ever-expanding digital networked technologies have not led to major changes, but to more fragmentation and specialisation within the field of higher art and design education.

In my opinion you see this very much reflected in the lack of awareness regarding the development of the workshop and the pedagogy around learning technology, materials, and skills. In most (Northern European) art schools you will find similar workshops, mostly related to old media and crafts and equipped to make “artefacts”: the wood, metal, ceramics, and plastic workshop; graphic and print studios; time-based media; photography and film. At the turn of the 21st century, digital technologies were slowly introduced; think of computers, editing studios, and fabrication technologies like laser cutters, 3D printers, and the like.

In practice, however, the art and design professors were increasingly distanced from “teaching” in the workshops. Art and design educators have limited knowledge in this ever-expanding field of complex technologies. The technical staff and instructors in the workshop have, as in Bauhaus period, little or no influence on a student’s artistic development. They also have a hard time keeping up with these new technologies, and often lack the artistic background and qualities to formulate appropriate pedagogy that critically examines the use of media and material.

I think today it is time to rethink this pedagogy in technologies and materials and, in doing so, to rethink the role of aesthetic production and making.

And to come back to Bauhaus, there are things we can learn from the holistic and open attitude of the Bauhauslers and their engagement with experiment. We should reconsider object lessons and material expeditions within the digital and the analogue realm.[[6]](#footnote-6)

We can learn from Josef Albers and Lázló Moholy Nagy. They taught their students to experiment with different materials through their senses. Pushing students to question and research the materials of that day and age.

In a world where we are getting out of touch with the physical and tangible, and have lost control over the virtual, it is crucial for designers and artists to again engage with the substantial, real world.

Not only through tools and media, which have been “supposedly” artistic, like the pencil, the camera, or wood, but through tools and media that relate to our world and time.

So thinking about this holistic and experimental approach of the Bauhaus led me to embark on the question of what the workshop of today should be like.   
As Jan Boelen has said:

How can we learn a certain attitude to deal with reality of today? Design has the enormous potential to create products that deal with our reality. This productive mode is necessary—to construct and make your own reality rather than becoming a consumer and a slave of reality. But if we are still dreaming of a reality that we can construct ourselves, then what are the skills that we need to know and to be in control of…?[[7]](#footnote-7)

Are we providing the students the tools, the skills, and the technology they need? Are we offering the right learning environment for them to be able to investigate and experiment with crucial phenomena of this time and age? Don’t we need to introduce students with new modes of making and seeing, and let them break away from the standard artistic toolset?

There is a great urgency regarding the changes and transformations taking place in our society. Hereby, two forces which illustrate these changes:

*Accelerating technological developments*

Making is becoming complex because we have more and more (digital) technologies at our disposal and, next to that, technologies become increasingly non-transparent, which makes it very difficult to make it your own. Students need knowledge and guidance in researching and exploring these (digital) technologies.

Like the critical engineers are saying, “The greater the dependence on a technology, the greater the need to study and expose its inner workings.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Technology can be a tool, a medium, or both. Making has meaning and is not a neutral activity. How do we, for example, overcome cultural biases and differences? Technology is not a means to an end. Critical making should be a basic learning objective within art education.  
  
*The Workshop of Other Knowledge*

What tools and materials do we have to offer in the workshop in a time and age where we run out of resources? What role can the workshop play in helping students to make more ecological decisions? What is the “matter” or “material” we create with?

At its core the Bauhaus project revolved around the “New Human Being.” It was not about learning a profession, but about the universal education/formation of the personality.

Making practice ever since has been very much human-centred, but can we continue thinking like this in the Anthropocene?

What can we learn from the discourse centred on the notion of the post-human? Can we also make for other entities? Can we use technology—such as VR—to empathise with the other? And can we use other entities to help us create? How do we, for example, work together with digital entities like “Artificial Intelligence”? What happens when new technologies such as AI enter the workshop?

In conclusion, I want to suggest developing a new vision around the pedagogy relating to technology, skill education, and specifically experiential learning which takes place in the art school. Most importantly this vision should not be developed separately but overarching all curricula, embedding “critical making” as an integral part within. By formulating better (skill) education regarding technology and making, it will enable students to deal with reality and connect to the world. In order to do this, it is necessary to cooperate, learn from each other, and let go of former hierarchical divides.

This pedagogy needs to redefine the learning environment we used to call the workshop.   
This is my further topic of research which I gave the working title the “Workshop of Other Knowledge[[9]](#footnote-9).” This research will result in several temporary, experimental, physical learning environments where tools, things, instruments, software, hardware, methods, and equipment are collected. These experiments will stimulate cross-, inter-, and transdisciplinary collaborations. Within this new learning environment, new modes of making and designing will be developed by breaking away from standardised ways of seeing and making.

Hopefully this research will lead to different learning environments within our art school and will inspire tutors, students and others to reimagine and see the world differently, and have the tools to respond more accurately to crucial phenomena of this time and age.

Being able to make invisible visible!

**REFERENCES**

Critical Engineering (2011–2017). Retrieved from https://criticalengineering.org/en

Davis, M. (2017). *Teaching Design, a guide to curriculum and pedagogy for college design faculty and teachers who use design in their classrooms* (p. 84). New York: Allworth Press.

Davis, M. (2015). *The Design School Lecture* *Serie*s. Retrieved from https://vimeo.com/116078233

Ellison, C. (2017). Workshop: Making beyond the post-medium condition. *Visual Culture in Britain*, *18*(2), 133–162.

Lehmann, A.-S. (2017). Material literacy. *Bauhaus*, *9*, 20.

Willem de Kooning Academy, Practices. Retrieved from <http://wdka.nl/practices>

Projekt Bauhaus (2017).Knowledge, technology, progress. Preliminary course: From Bauhaus to Silicon Valley. Retrieved from https://www.projekt-bauhaus.de/en/data/events/preliminary-course-from-bauhaus-to-silicon-valley

Rajagopal, A. (2017, December 1). Istanbul Design Biennial curator Jan Boelen wants to shake up design education. *Metropolis Magazine*. Retrieved from [https://www.metropolismag.com/design/jan-boelen-istanbul-design-biennial**/**](https://www.metropolismag.com/design/jan-boelen-istanbul-design-biennial/)

Schutten, I**.,** Adu, N., Sei-Poku, Teeuwen, R.,& Troxler, P. (2018). Social design as a political act. *Beyond Social* (p. 1). Retrieved from <http://beyond-social.org/wiki/index.php/Social_Design_as_a_Political_Act>

Smith, T. (2017). The Bauhaus has never been modern. In R. P. Regina Bittner, *Craft Becomes Modern: The Bauhaus in the Making.* Bielefeld: Kerber.

Willem de Kooning Academy, Stations. Retrieved from <https://www.wdka.nl/stations>

Aldje van Meer, Willem de Kooning Academy, http://workshop-ok.wdka.nl/

1. Schutten, I**.,** Adu, N., Sei-Poku, Teeuwen, R.,& Troxler, P. (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See <http://wdka.nl/practices> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Schutten, I**.,** Adu, N., Sei-Poku, Teeuwen, R.,& Troxler, P. (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See <https://www.wdka.nl/stations> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Davis, M. (2017) *Teaching Design, a guide to curriculum and pedagogy for college design faculty and teachers who use design in their classrooms* (p. 84). New York: Allworth Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lehmann (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Jan Boelen was curating the 4th Istanbul Design Biennial, *A school of schools*. See references for Rajagopal in *Metropolitan Magazine*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See https://criticalengineering.org/en

   [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See http://workshop-ok.wdka.nl/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)