



> Sustainable art education for sustainable design

Ages ago when I was at school art was my favourite subject. As a matter of fact I wanted to study art but I had ,only‘ the possibility to study design. At the beginning I wanted to do what I want and did not want what I did.

> „*The artist does what he wants and the designer wants what he does*“

was a definition from the German designer Prof. Kurt Weidemann. The conflict between art and design did not leave me since. I remember that my old professor Robert Sessler once accused me for being an aesthet. I was confused: *Wasn't this what we were meant to become?* It took me decades to find an answer for this question. To learn about aesthetics I read Hume, Baumgarten and Kant where I was introduced to the term

> *felix aestheticus*.

This was exactly what I wanted to become and this was what I understood as the main focus of my art education.

> Following Baumgarten, an artist needs a number of talents. To be able to understand beauty (*pulchre cogitare*), a *felix aestheticus* needs a fine and elegant spirit, an *ingenium* who is capable to imagine something, enrich and memorise this sensual impression (Baumgarten Aesthetica §30). An artist needs the talent to look into the future, like the antique fortune-tellers (*vates*). It takes *aesthetical temper*, combined with ethical mind, gladly equipped with external values (money, power, labour, delight, health etc.).

> „*As the talent as native productive power of the artist is part of the nature, you could say that genius is the native state of mind (ingenium) by which the nature gives the rule to the art.*“ (Kant, KdU 235§46).

The idea of aesthetics was exclusive and elite thinking. The competence of aesthetic judgement in Hume's and Baumgarten's opinion is attached to individuals who distinguish from the masses by richness of knowledge and educated taste. Both Baumgarten and Hume believed that it takes special education to get to a higher state of perception.

The expert has to be educated in mind and sentiment:

> “*Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this value character; and joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is true standard of taste and beauty*” (Hume, SoT278).

> Baumgarten’s ‚Aesthetica‘ laid the fundament for today’s art education. I know that a lot has changed since the time when I was at school and I am not an expert in art education, but as teacher in design education I meet young students who were inspired by their art education to study design. Each one dreams about becoming a *felix aestheticus*, a member of the *community of experts* who would be able to make objective judgements about aesthetics. It takes minimum one frustrating semester to change their prefixed minds.

One thing that has not changed is the undisputed philosophy of aesthetics as the principle of art. One thing that has changed is the understanding of art since Baumgarten.

If we go back in history before the Renaissance, art did not include what was later called the fine arts, but it included fields like mathematics, agriculture, alchemy and astrology. The Renaissance changed the meaning of arts and introduced music, literature and fine arts. But art did by far not have the liberty we claim today. In fact the idea of the science of aesthetics as formulated by Baumgarten had in mind to set up rules how art had to be perceived and as consequence to be created.

> „*Ars imitatur naturam*“ was the task.

Hegel was concerned about problems of the arts and identified a change of the role. In his *lectures about aesthetics* one can notice his development from deploring the existing situation of the artist to predicting the new role of arts in a coming modern society. In his last *lecture about aesthetics* in 1825 he emphasised that *art will surpass itself as the only cultural orientation power*.

> “*The art as explication of the truth transforms into something higher, and this determines the position of art, as it is for our time, by surpassing the art*”.

Hegel, Berliner Vorlesungen über Ästhetik, Libelt 1829 Ms.25/30

Hegel believed that as soon as the humans will live in the modern state, art will loose its universal meaning, but not the meaning as such. Art will gain a new function of critics for the development of social alternatives and as critics with utopian importance.

> Art in the modern culture is stimulant for reflection that itself precedes societal changing activities.

Gethmann-Siefert, Einführung in die Ästhetik zu Hegel, Vorlesungen über Ästhetik, 230-231

Hegel's visions inspired Adorno in his thesis, art shall be critics of the society and also Marcuse in his programmatic reflections about art in the sense of the utopian function of critics. Applied arts and architecture were in most reflections excluded from aesthetics being non-autonomous arts.

But Hegel had already stated that art as such is not autonomous but has the task to educate towards humanity. Art can and has to show examples of successful life and the effects of unsuccessful behaviour to provoke societal and individual reflection.

The idea of Hegel has a surprisingly identical meaning as the definition of the Nobel laureate in economy 1978 Herbert Simon which says that

> „*design means activities which aim at changing existing situations into preferred ones*“.

So the task of a designer is to identify problems of the existing situation and show solutions.

There is an ongoing discussion whether a designer is an artist. If we accept aesthetics as leading philosophy and the definition of art of the times of Baumgarten, the designer is without any doubt an artist. If we claim freedom of arts as condition to be an artist, he is not. But I think there is a romantic misinterpretation of liberty in the postulate of freedom of art. It is not the question of total freedom to do whatever one wants to do. There is a societal task art has to fulfil. Design fulfils this task in general, unfortunately not in a sustainable way as we will see later. To alter Kurt Weidemann's quote „*an artist has to be free to want what he does*“.

Our modern society shows a tendency to be superficial and a lack of precision in definitions. Meaningful words, once they come into public use, are often misused and as a matter of fact emptied of their original meaning. One of those words was the word aesthetics that virtually shifted paradigm from a subjective to an objective meaning. Wolfgang Iser asked the question whether *aesthetics* became a pass-par-tout word which fits everywhere because it means nothing. (Wolfgang Iser *Grenzgänge der Ästhetik*) Another one is the word *sustainable*.

> *To sustain* means to maintain, to support, to endure. It does not mean *ecologic* although without respect for ecology there will be no sustainability. Sustainability is about our responsibility for future generations. As we know that the world population will grow and as we have built our economy on fossil resources which are inevitably about to come to an end and as our generations have damaged the environment like never before in history of mankind we have to do a lot of homework to hand over this planet to our children in a good shape.

If we are aware that we risk the existence of mankind on this planet by unsustainable behaviour, we should be very careful in using the term properly to avoid that *sustainable* becomes *unsustainable*.

We don't need to reinvent the wheel or go into deep philosophical discussions to define sustainability. This is one of the few questions where you find an unanimous global agreement. As a consequence of a resolution of the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1982, the so called Brundtland Commission proposed in 1986 a definition which became adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1987. In a resolution of the year 2002 the UN declared the period from 2005 until 2015 the decade of sustainable education, to be carried out by UNESCO. This is where we are in now. The definition is:

> *Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the abilities of future generations to meet their own needs.*

It contains within two key concepts:

1. The concept of needs
in particular the essential needs of the world's poor (...) and

2. The idea of limitation
imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs.

Brundtland report „Our Common Future“ welcomed by the UN General Assembly in its resolution 42/187 and published by Oxford University Press in 1987.

> Our thinking is linear. We take resources, turn them into products, use the products and throw them away. As only species in the world humans have a concept of waste. No other living organism acts this way.

> We have to learn circular thinking. At the end of the chain has to be something we can give back to earth.

> Our waste-concept-thinking now even starts to turn our cultural achievements into waste. As an example: Our entire storage system for knowledge is no longer sustainable. It looks as if we cannot avoid the loss of all human knowledge stored after 1850. Modern paper has a lifespan of under 100 years. Film has a lifespan of under 50 years. DVD begins to lose data after 10 years and USB storage is less than 2 years. We are facing a digital dementia of our entire time. We will not sustain in history.

One of the tasks of art has been the archiving of time. Without art we would have no knowledge about human history. Yet modern art has stopped to play this role and joined the philosophy of waste. It begins with using unsustainable material and it ends with performance art which is only living in the moment it is happening.

> We are about to lose the achievement of writing. As different writing systems on our globe avoid easy flow of information we will get communication systems independent from writing.

> We are about to lose 98% of today's spoken languages. In the entire history of mankind we assume that 1000 ancient languages got lost. We presume the loss of 5000 languages within this century, leaving us with 100 languages.

There is a huge need for cultural sustainability and artists have to stand the question if it is the right time to insist in absolute freedom or leave the artificial ivory tower to play their societal role properly.

What is the aim of sustainable art education in this respect?

Is it to make art sustainable as archiving societal factor for the benefit of future generations?

Is it to make art education enduring?

Is it to teach sustainable art? What is sustainable art?

Is it to teach the art of sustainability?

Whatever sustainable art education means or could mean - the sustainable design education needs the help of the art education. We have to change today's design education to produce a new generation of designers with high competence to generate sustainable development. Unlike in the past where the art education for children and the education for applied art like design was not synchronised to achieve amplifying effects, the future needs combined action. In other words: The art education of the past was in itself not sustainable and sustainable thinking in the future should also be applied for the entire art education chain from Kindergarten to University level. As the field is extensive we need students with prepared background. There will be no time to waste for changing prefixed minds.

The designers are slowly beginning to understand that they played a fatal role in the last century in heating up mass consumerism and acting totally unsustainable. The human sense for beauty became perverted and abused. Like the artists the designers enjoyed their status of irresponsibility.

> John Thackara said „*if can design our way into difficulty we can design our way out*“.
(„In the bubble, designing for a complex world“ 2006 Introduction p.1)

> But we also have to listen to Albert Einstein who said that *we cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.*

We need new thinking.

> Sustainable design means

- a. activities which aim at changing unsustainable situations into sustainable ones.
- b. design (in the meaning of concepts) that meets the needs of the present without compromising the abilities of future generations to meet their needs.

Redesigning our global system will be a project of at least 30 years and it will happen mainly through rediscovering regional cultural values.

> Sustainable design is an upcoming new discipline within design. It is basing on Herbert Simon's definition of changing existing situations into preferred ones. It is taking on the societal task of arts prescribed by Hegel to show solutions for successful life concepts. To some extent it gets back to a pre-Renaissance definition of arts including mathematics, engineering, chemistry, new media technology and even agriculture.

Sustainable design is process and not product oriented and has not much or nothing to do with the aesthetic aspect of the past. We have to eliminate the concept of waste. We have to break all rules.

An indispensable condition to achieve an improvement is that all related experts exchange their needs and demands to listen to and learn from each other. To make a step into this direction was my intention with this contribution. You might not agree to my reasoning but I am open for any argument that helps to create the future as long as we avoid arguments that leave us in the past.

We are responsible to build the home for our children: 50% more population than today in the coming 30 years. It is about your children. Don't give them a reason to blame you for having made their life a bad one.

> We don't own the world. We have borrowed it from our children.

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