

Theory 2:—theory development

A student-teacher pedagogical gardening-plot (KHIO)

On the MA-programme in *design*, students come from all over the world; with a baggage of different professional and cultural backgrounds—different professional stages and professional cultures along with a variety of experiences, assumptions and backgrounds linked to education and nurture.

Over the last few years over 50% of the class—normally 24 students in 3 specialisation—come from the South American, African, East Asian, Middle Eastern and European areas. In Theory 2, *professional = personal*. Asking: “what does the design-stage look like in your geographic/professional area?”

This could be mistaken for a “world-question” resulting in the kind of cultural *entrapment*, that would constrain our students in their professional choices, on their way to an MA at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts (KHIO). However, our aim is always to find and activate, platforms of *connection*.

In Theory 2, the students are in the spring term of their first year (MA1). By country the MA1-students are from: *Colombia, Ghana, Kenya, the Philippines, China, Iran, Turkey, France, Estonia, Shetland, Russia, Germany, Denmark, Norway and Multiple*. Three of these, exchange students. This is the palette.

Of course, it is critical for a course to have a *framework*, and a *structure*. However, it is no secret that—in a *researched* creative education—the students’ learning *from each other* plays a major part. The course curriculum constitutes a *stage*, on which such processes are *initiated* and played out.

As in a *theatre*, the course therefore provides the lens through which *learning-outcomes* are reaped; not only at the end of the course, but throughout the term. With the work of time a *reflective self*, adapted to the students’ different aptitudes and talents, hatches and is enabled to develop *theory*.

The definition of theory—in Theory 2—is the hatching of the *other view*: the ability to involve lessons learned from specialised courses in an *investigation* guided by 1) *aesthetics* [sensorial learning]; 2) conversations involving *references* of a broad variety: *if personally important, then they are valid*¹.

The students are trained to reference in APA², and thereby learn to script references that normally are locked to the *specialised* realm of experience. They are thereby enable to unlearn a major impediment of theorising, as often is ascribed to theory: that of theorising abstractly, rather than *concretely*.

Or, at least, we attempt to do so: for instance, by including references to other media- than written texts, in a course bent at enabling the students to develop their own references, their professional self, in the concluding theory course that we run—during the second year of the MA—in the autumn.

Theorising the *concrete*—and theorising *concretely*—in design, is a legacy from a centuries old legacy³: gardening the *awareness* and *cyclical* practices of 1) *goal-seeking* and 2) *experimental process* 3) *jointly*. Mining ‘experimental chaos’ for *opportunity*, making them *converge* in this *triadic* accomplishment.

This is *not* a straightforward—or, linear—endeavour. Since the students’ *process* is a determining factor for what can be achieved within the course: that is, setting the terms of *progress* based on what is *achieved* in practices hatched and groomed by the 3 specialisations offered by the MA-programme.

These are fashion- and costume-design, interior architecture and furniture design, graphic design and illustration. The scope of the theory curriculum is to involve the practices from the specialisations, involving them in design-thinking, and letting the students develop as *reflective practitioners*.

The research hatched from the theory-developing *swirl* is *not* literature-driven, but is a layer of practice developed, that is absolutely necessary to yield a whole *design education*, while remaining conversant with specifically theoretical lenses/mirrors⁴, in order to find in oneself a place of work and belonging.

THE PANDEMIC—the quads

Many MA1-students 2021/22 came to Norway during the *lockdown*. At that time, the lessons learned from

theodor.barth@khio.no

teaching during the *pandemic*, crystallised into more *systematic* understandings. Small groups, called **QUADs**, were initially conceived as *cohorts* created to *forestall* and *moderate* the impact of *isolation*.

Learning in *small groups* had some impacts on learning, that worked in a positive way. Several classes of students had already fed back to the MA programme a request for *more group-work*. However, the questions of how they would connect to and work with the specialisations were unsolved.

Since the exams are by *specialisation*, the **QUADs** were initially selected across specialisations, based on affinities developed among the students during the year. On account of the pandemic, the groups were at first conceived as *support-groups*. Due to the restrictions they were e.g. the only live audience.

When not gathering with the whole class on Zoom, we had walk-and-talk tutorials by **QUADs**. Through this a specific student-teacher interface grew a professional curiosity, of looking into the detail of work in groups, rather than one-by-one. Thereby challenging the *auteur* tradition of art school.

In the aftermath, the **QUADs** were initiated in a more systematic way. The present class of first year students met in **QUADs** according to a *rotating* principle, whereby they never met in the same group twice, and thereby got to become acquainted with the entire class on a professional basis.

The **QUADs** were also defined according to a specific role-structure reaped from a *key-note* given by Bruno Latour to a class of freshmen at *Science-Po* at the Sorbonne in Paris. It is a method of grounding *floating statements*, of the type typically found on *social media* (Twitter, Instagram, TikTok)⁵.

The *roles* are the following: 1) *one* presents and idea for their reflective work; 2) a *second* supports the idea with research they have come across; 3) a *third* critiques this research; 4) the *fourth*, knowhow of materials, tools and workshop supporting the realisation of the idea. 1-hour *morning-meetings*.

The role-shift with the group was supported by S. Beckett’s invention of a choreographic pattern for a performance called **QUAD**. Hence the quick rotation of the above roles—emulating *morning-meetings* in a design studio—was accordingly propelled by the pedagogic metaphor of a *pattern-in-performance*.

The long-term effect of the **QUAD** meetings, featuring Theory 2, was that the students became more opinionated in class. Which was a desired outcome. Interestingly, however, the reception of messages became *less* precise than when the students were living more *isolated* in the periods of lockdown.

LOGGING RESEARCH—the black book

To log their process in their MA-courses the students keep logbooks that evolve in different stages: they are called *BlackBook* (**BB**). In Theory 2 the students develop **BB2**. In their MA they start with a *creative weekly diary*, progress to a *research portfolio* (**BB2**) and conclude with a *learning theatre*.

The work with the **BBs** is prompted by the interaction in the **QUADs**. Whereby the students get to test their process and outcomes in a *peer-to-peer* relation, with other students. They are trained in presenting books and other media, and *reference* them, in the spirit of *investigative aesthetics*.

In the first term, they are trained in keeping a *diary* in the first term, as a *working-habit*. Then they are trained in various aspects of evaluating the process in Theory 2. These aspects are called *modules*: 1) *experiment*; 2) *narrative*; 3) *format* and 4) *scenario*. In the third term they work to bridge *time* and *space*.

From the vantage point of the *professional person*, Theory 2 is the most demanding course; as the MA1s are trained to observe and evaluate their own work, which is a *leap of faith* beyond the mindset they bring from their BA: to get into the *driver’s seat*—to drive and arrive—abiding certain traffic regulations.

Conditions that are realistic in terms of their future *work-life*; with the **BB** as vision for a research-driven work-life in relations of co-work with artists, users & clients, 3rd sector organisations and academia: featuring this year’s collaboration with the *Consumer Council* with the scope of *environmental humanities*.

PITCHING GREENWASHERS—the lineup

The lineup is a public event which is *distinct* from other shows (e.g. white cube/black box) in that it is a means to pursue an *inquiry* in public. It ideally is a method of *crowdsourcing*, whereby the students get precious information on *3rd party readability*. How their work reads and spurs a competent audience.

The collaboration with the Consumer’s Council on the *Greenwashers of the year 2022* (cf, separate sheet), was accordingly a sample taste of the *next* logging format: the *learning theatre*. According to the general pedagogical principle that each new challenge builds on already existing achievements.

WRITING ESSAYS—the anthology

This puzzle-piece fit connecting one course to the next, also applies to the essays the students are asked to submit in *Theory 2*: a 1000 word essay reflecting a professional query, developed in the more *intimate mode* of personal aspiration. The essays are gathered in an anthology and *published* in the Fall.

In the first term, before they write anything, the students are asked to reflect in a *different* media than writing, based on a feature interview with someone they respect. When they are then asked to submit an essay in writing it is therefore already involved and located in a reflective practice of wider definition.

RE-EFFECTING—the MA journey

The sample of work-fragments that you have seen, are developed as puzzle pieces of an *ensemble* to come. As first year students on the MA-programme, the students have, at their present stage, familiarised themselves with 3 kinds of *public arenas*: a *line-up*, a *book*, research *logbook* presentations in class⁶.

In this *triangle* of public appearances, it is intended that the students should find a *home* for their work. They become dwellers of a *life in motion*, which is the MA conceived as a *journey*: according to the Greek etymology of /theory/. *Theoria: a journey to a foreign place with the support of a community*⁷.

By finding a home for one’s work we mean finding a way to become operational in the contact zone. A notion developed by Mary Louise Pratt⁸: *I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today. Eventually I will use the term to reconsider the models of community that many of us rely on in teaching and theorizing and that are under challenge today.*

If there is a home in work, it is in the *eye of a whirlwind*. Such are the current conditions. The lessons learned in 2022—in the transition from the pandemic to a ‘new normal’—is that information on the core of *sober* course-requirements should be *separated* from the context of their application.

The reason is that the context of application *follows* from the students professional activities *during* the course. The experience is that only past a *critical mass of work* the students develop an understanding of the deliveries to the course, and what is asked of them in Theory 2, *regrouping* learning outcomes.

Awareness is not something achieved once and for all. But something *grown* and *gardened*. In creative work professional selves *erode*, fall apart and have to be regrouped and *re-effected*, to develop a hands-on understanding of the loops and circles of feedback, that are sustainable *in-house & beyond*.

The students attending Theory 2 in 2022 (in alphabetical order):

Tobias Bay Bang, Levi Holt Bratland, Sophie Solveig Cabrera, Mohammad Ghasemi, Espen Brække Grønberg, Lydia Hann, Frode Helland, Rita Kinuthia, Kine Kolstad, J.P. Lasco, Pucen Liu, Eyrund Müller, Marte Elise Nesdal, Ingrid Pettersson, Aina Piao, Emmanuel Prempeh, Øyvind Rogstad, Zarina Saidova, Ali Onat Türker, Morteza Vaseghi, Amanda Bjerager Vesthardt. *Exchange students: Christophe Reban, Julia Ranzenberger, Charlotte Videau.*

¹ The students are trained in hypothetical thinking: *if... then*.

² APA: book of style, American Psychological Association.

³ In Italian and Georgia Vasari’s verbatim, *disegno* is *drawing and purpose*.

⁴ Achieving the same objective by different steps and means.

⁵ Media of the *Extraterrestrial* in Bruno Latour’s verbatim.

⁶ Cf. <https://khioda.khio.no/khio-xmlui/handle/11250/2991188>

⁷ Thompson, Chris. (2010). *Felt: Fluxus, Joseph Beuys and the Dalai Lama*. The MIT press.

⁸ Pratt, Mary Louise. (1991). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25595469>