Commoning as an Act of Design

Rethinking Art and Design Higher Education Through the Lens of the Commons

[A WESTERN PERSPECTIVE]

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ENSCi LES ATELIERS

Mastère Spécialisé
Sustainable Innovation
By Design

Anonymisation and Confidentiality Principles

Rooted in my previous Master's thesis, *From Processing to Design: Free Open Source Culture and the Redefinition of Contemporary Graphic Design Practice*—available HERE—this research is a continuation of a project, examining the conditions of art and design teaching and practice.

For the purposes of this study, the fieldwork conducted required the definition of anonymisation principles, attuned to the methodological, ethical and political issues at stake. Indeed, ethnographic research raise ethical and deontological issues that shape both the conduct of the research and its restitution:

> "This leads to political issues. How can we convey the words of those who did not initiate them? And for what purpose? How can we account for divergent perspectives within a milieu of mutual acquaintance? It seems to us that social sciences have an imperative not to focus solely on perspectives with which the researcher empathizes but to also engage with those that feel more distant."[0]

The legal and natural persons mentioned or cited in this thesis have not reviewed or approved the entirety of the manuscript. They are absolved of any responsibility. The author assumes sole responsibility for any inaccuracies or errors that may appear in the text. Interviewees whose interviews were transcribed and cited have provided their consent. Individuals who explicitly requested not to be identified in the work have been anonymized, if cited.

0 Aude Béliard and Jean-Sébastien Eideliman, "*Au-delà de la déontologie. Anonymat et confidentialité dans le travail ethnographique*," in *Politiques de l'enquête. Épreuves ethnographiques* (Paris: La Découverte, Bibliothèque de l'IRIS, 2008), 123–141, HAL Archives, ISBN 9782707156563.

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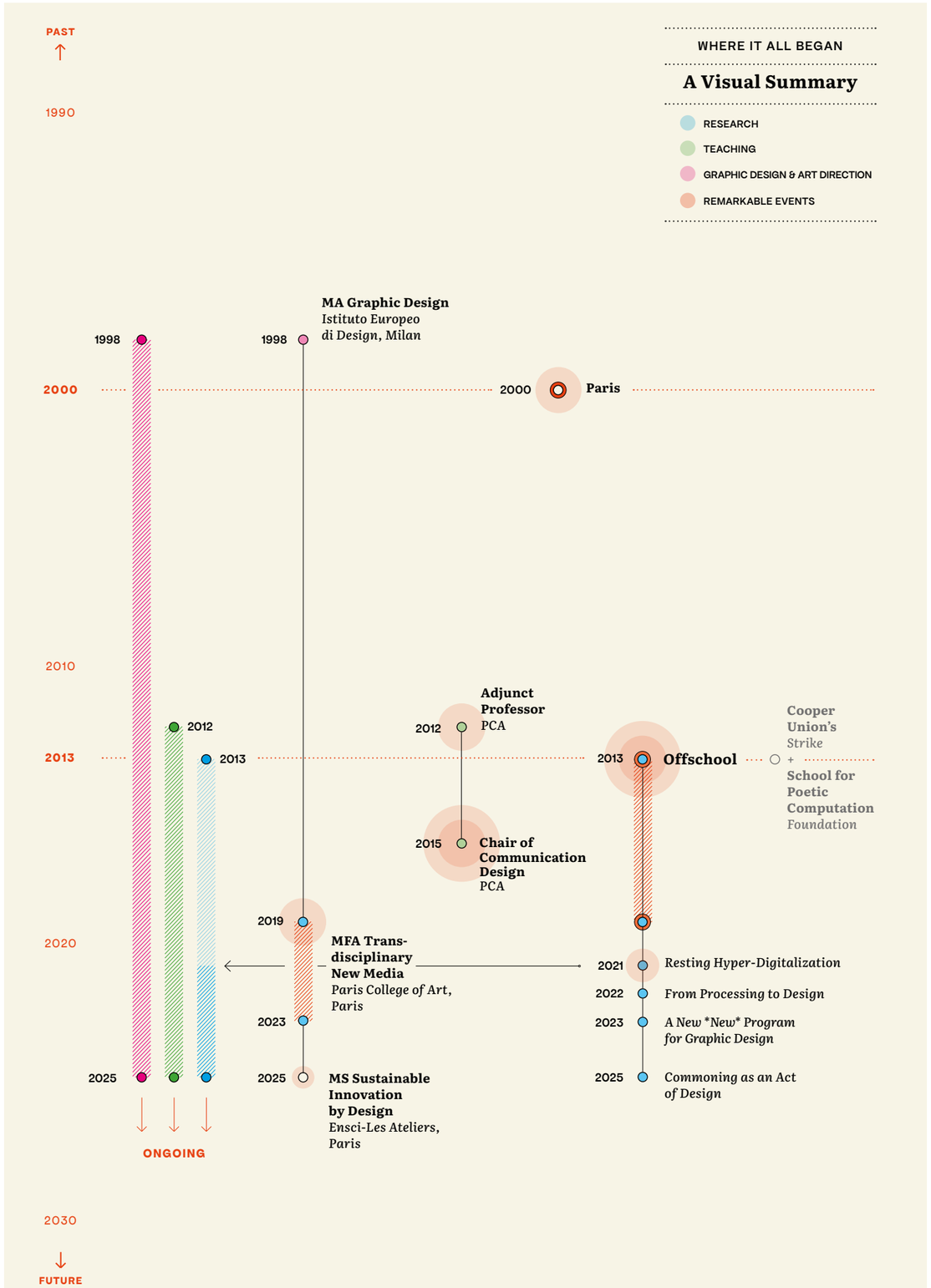
I hope this work will not only resonate with its readers but also inspire new conversations and actions around the importance of education in design.

Table of contents



[INTRODUCTION]

Where It All Began

In May 2013, the students of Cooper Union, a New York-based institution renowned for its programs in art, architecture, and engineering, initiated one of the most prolonged protests in the annals of higher education in the United States, lasting over two months.

They occupied the office of Jamshed Bharucha, the president elected in 2011, in opposition to his executive decision to introduce tuition fees for the first time since the institution's founding in 1859.[1] Cooper Union was, at that moment, one of the nation's remaining bastions of free education. For 150 years, it had remained committed to its foundational mission of offering education accessible to individuals regardless of social, gender, or racial background.[2] The protest represented a critical juncture for the students, providing an unprecedented opportunity to challenge the prevailing model of higher education in the U.S. as a commercial enterprise and to advocate for a new vision for its future.[3] In the summer of 2013, after sixty-five days, the occupation came to an end. Despite the establishment of a working group comprised of students, alumni, and board trustees aimed at exploring viable solutions to preserve Cooper Union's tuition-free status, the board, in January 2014, opted for a second time to institute tuition charges.[4]

In November of the same year, Zach Lieberman, an artist and educator based in New York and an active participant in the free open source movement, announced the creation of the School for Poetic Computation. In his keynote at the Eyeo Festival, Lieberman shared his decision to diverge from traditional educational frameworks to explore alternative pedagogies in art, design, and technology. After a decade of teaching at Parsons The New School, one of the most well-known American institutions of art and design—and most expensive—, he stepped down and decided to co-found, alongside Taeyoon Choi, Amit Pitaru, and Jen Lowe, the School for Poetic Computation. The program was envisioned as an artist-run initiative merging the aspects of a school, a residency, and a research group, and it aimed to offer a short and accessible program to artists and designers eager to delve into the confluence of code, design, hardware, and theoretical inquiry.[5] With this project Lieberman initiated his reflective inquiry into the essence of education, advocating for a horizontal pedagogical approach that is both transdisciplinary and self-directed. Through the School for Poetic Computation (SFPC), he sought to address the fundamental question, "What is meaningful in teaching art and design?"[6]

In 2013, again, I co-founded, alongside Céline Guyot and Andrew Schachman, *Offschool: A Continuing Process*, a Paris-based organization offering workshops in art, design, and architecture.[7] At that time, I was beginning my teaching journey at Parsons Paris as a foundation year instructor and I now realize how much these early years of my teaching practice profoundly shaped my future explorations into the realms of art and design education, which subsequently became the focal point of my research. From the outset of my teaching career, I experienced a vague and undefined frustration with the established teaching methodologies in art and design, primarily due to doubts about the institutions' ability to prioritize the needs of their students over their own economic and political preoccupations. Offschool, a "non-school," was my initial response to these doubts, and it aimed at reshaping education approaching art and design teaching and learning from a critical perspective. The investigation initiated with Offschool was centered from the beginning on

1 "Peter Cooper's Vision | The Cooper Union," accessed November 7, 2020, http://cooper.edu/about/history/peter-coopers-vision.
2 *ibid.*
3 *The Ivory Tower*, Documentary (Samuel Goldwyn Films (2014) (USA), 2014).
4 *ibid.*
5 *Eyeo 2013 - Zach Lieberman*, 2013, https://vimeo.com/69437363.
6 *ibid.*
7 "Facebook," accessed May 17, 2024, https://www.facebook.com/Offschool.Paris.

two fundamental questions: what is relevant to be taught in art and design, and how should we teach it? Through discussions with colleagues and friends who shared a similar vision, it became evident that our collective inquiry, while not unique, was nevertheless urgent. Motivated by a shared desire for a new educational paradigm, we envisioned creating a project that would be a hybrid of a research hub, a space for critical examination, and a confluence point for art and design disciplines. Offschool operated for several years, conducting workshops and inviting colleagues, friends, designers, artists, and students to share their visions, knowledge, and intuitions. Through these participative processes, we endeavored to construct a different approach to teaching and learning.

Looking back at 2013, it becomes evident that these three simultaneous but seemingly unrelated events—linked nevertheless by shared interests, geography, or objectives—were indicative of a significant shift in art and design education and underscored an urgent need to address critical issues such as the accessibility of education, the reassessment of methodologies and tools for teaching and learning, and the institution's role in meeting students' needs. They also defined what my research would be for the following ten years.

Trained as a graphic designer more than twenty years ago, my career has evolved into a hybrid practice integrating design, pedagogy, and research. Since my integration in 2012 at Parson Paris (now Paris College of Art), my work has increasingly intersected these disciplines, with each practice informing and enriching the others. Since then, an obsessive question has followed me throughout my journey from instructor in the foundation year to chair of the Communication Design department: what should I teach, and how should I teach it? How can I fulfill my responsibilities as a leader and shaper of future designers, ensuring relevance, understanding their needs, and preparing them to address contemporary societal challenges?

In 2019, joining the MFA program in Transdisciplinary New Media at Paris College of Art presented an exceptional opportunity to explore these topics, driven by the intuition that re-evaluating the role of technology in design education was crucial. Through my thesis "From Processing to Design: Free Open Source Culture and the Redefinition of Contemporary Design Practice," followed by my degree project "A New *New* Program for Graphic Design: Access, Community, Free," I directed my research towards exploring free open source culture[8] and its impact on graphic design. This research, however, still needs to address the questions raised in conclusion of my previous thesis on how institutions could evolve to acknowledge the major shift that occurred in the design practice. Joining the MS Sustainable Innovation by Design program at ENSCi - Les Atelier, exactly ten years after the pivotal year of 2013, allowed me to continue my research and address unresolved questions regarding the evolution of design education.

How can the economic and sociological theories of the commons serve as a lens for reconsidering art and design education while rethinking their institutional structures? Given the intersection of contemporary commons theories and free open-source culture, how might the relationship between code and the commons inform a critical reevaluation of spaces, tools, and methodologies for transmitting and sharing knowledge? These are the questions addressed in this research.

The core of this research is grounded in a field investigation conducted through an ethnographic approach. Between July and November 2024, I conducted fourteen formal interviews with experts on the commons theories, key figures from both formal and informal design education institutions, and critical voices reflecting on their lived experiences within these contexts. Additionally, the inquiry is enriched by hundreds of informal conversations with students, staff, and faculty, accumulated throughout my teaching career.

Given the broad scope of the subject, this methodology was chosen to better define the perimeter of the exploration, focusing on the Italy-France-U.S. triangle—regions that have shaped my own education and professional journey. The interviews, conducted in Italian, French, and English, brought together diverse voices that were essential in capturing the systemic complexity of the topic. Additionally, the research was enriched by literature reviews of books, articles, and other relevant materials, which played a key role in establishing the investigation's context and theoretical frame.

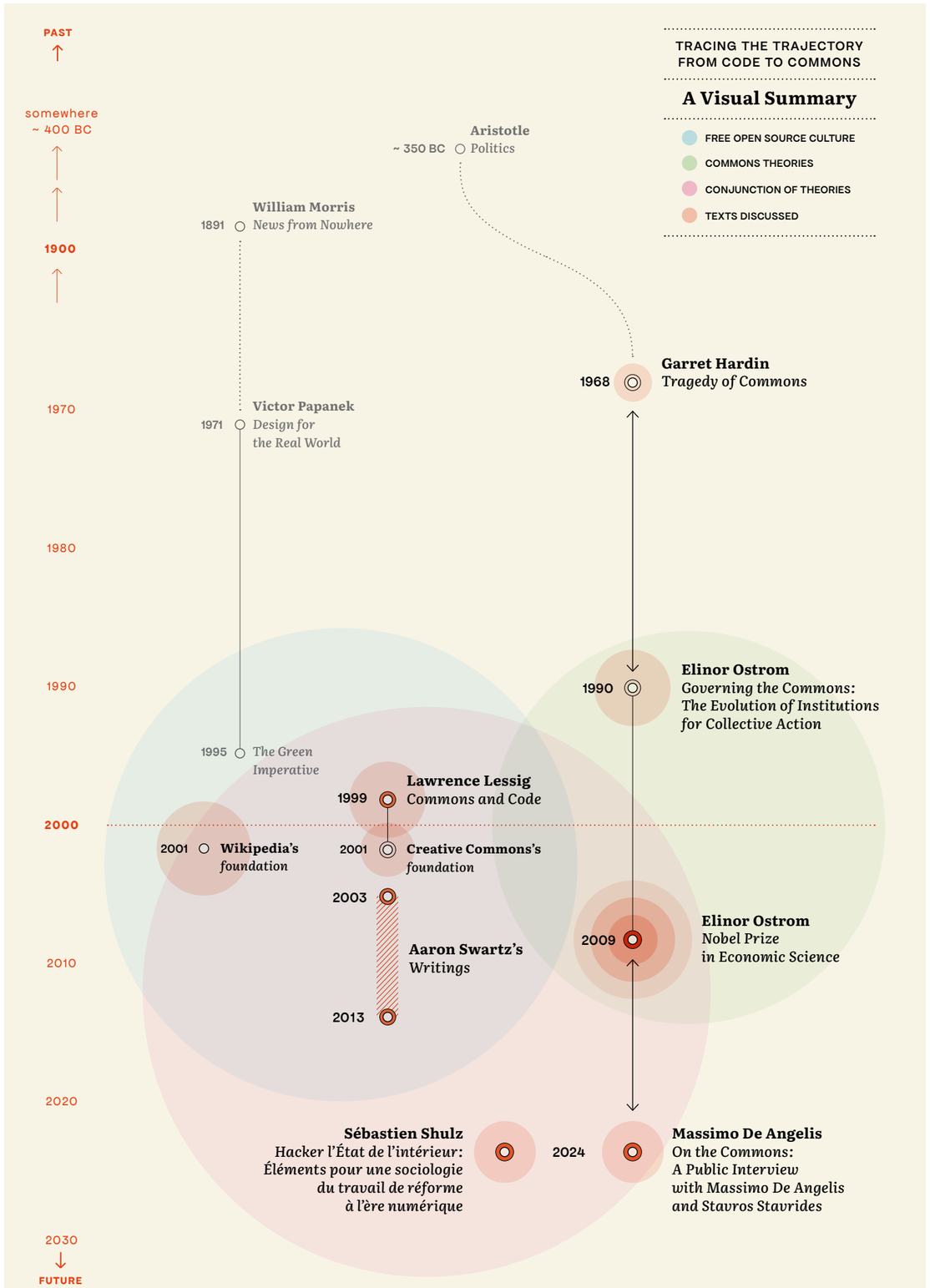
8 The term 'free open source' is used to describe not only software programming but also cultures and communities built on the idea of decentralization, collaboration, and free access to information. If 'free' is intended as 'freedom' and 'source' as 'documentation,' it is possible to make the transition from 'free open source software' to 'free open source culture.' Lucrezia Russo, *From Processing to Design: Free Open Source Culture and the Redefinition of Contemporary Graphic Design Practice*, (MFA diss. Paris College of Art, 2022), p. 16. This definition has been broadly explored in chapter 1, section 2 "From Hackers to FLOSS (Free/Libre Open Source Software: A Moral Debate."

In the first chapter, we explore the intersection between free open source culture and the concept of commons, emphasizing how this relationship predates the recent surge of interest in commons as a framework for fostering more responsible, inclusive, collaborative, and transversal approaches to contemporary environmental, social, and political challenges. Using Elinor Ostrom's work as a foundation, we demonstrate how her Nobel Prize recognition legitimized theories and methodologies already effectively implemented within communities linked to free open source culture. Through an examination of key texts by sociologists, economists, and activists such as Sébastien Shulz, Lawrence Lessig, and Aaron Swartz, we establish a foundation for uncovering connections between certain design methodologies and the practices of designers who adopt these approaches. In defining commons, we outline the key pillars—resources, community, and commoning—that will guide our investigation.

In the second chapter, we examine the challenges faced by higher education institutions in art and design as they strive to remain relevant while preparing designers for contemporary challenges. The chapter frames the institutional crisis within the broader context of market-driven dynamics and shifting institutional priorities, which often undermine the core mission of education by weakening the social fabric of schools. It explores the growing distress among students, who increasingly perceive schools as extensions of societal pressures rather than safe spaces for learning and creative development. Drawing on bell hooks' concept of "resisting and transgressing" and Sara Ahmed's perspective on complaints as catalysts for change, the chapter underscores the need for institutions to recognize their inherently social nature. Addressing students' discomfort requires acknowledging the complexity and systemic roots of the problem while fostering resilient, supportive communities.

The third chapter follows the grid of examination—resources, community, and commoning—to explore how institutions of higher education in art and design can reposition themselves by reconstructing the social fabric within their schools. This investigation draws on examples of educational experiments linked to free open source culture and community-driven models, including Muriel Cooper's Visible Language Workshop, the Processing Foundation, the School for Poetic Computation, and NØ SCHOOL. These examples serve as counterpoints, highlighting alternative governance structures and collaborative pedagogies. By analyzing key institutions such as Paris College of Art, Istituto Europeo di Design, and ENSCI–Les Ateliers, we examine how pedagogical practices shape relationships both within the school and with its broader ecosystem. Drawing from the commons framework established in the first chapter, we trace how resources, communities, and commoning practices interconnect within an iterative cycle of creation, negotiation, and renewal. This perspective positions commoning as a design process, emphasizing adaptability, shared responsibility, and continuous co-evolution as essential components of resilient educational ecosystems.

Considering this analysis, the research will conclude with a reconsideration of the Offschool project as a potential tool for enabling institutions to redefine their trajectories and explore alternative educational frameworks. •



[CHAPTER ONE]

Tracing the Trajectory from Code to Commons

Let me address the question of the definition of the commons. […] What we share is what we have in common. The difficulty with this resource-based definition of the commons is that it is too limited, it does not go far enough. We need to open it up and bring in social relations in the definition of the commons.[9]

— MASSIMO DE ANGELIS, 2024

I was studying the commons from the beginning, but I didn't know it.[10]

— ELINOR OSTROM, 2009

When the economist Elinor Ostrom, alongside her colleague Olivier Williamson, was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 2009 for her work on the governance of commons, it marked a growing recognition of the potential of collective action and self-organization for managing shared resources, and as a viable alternative for societal organization, positioned between privatization and government control.[11] Ostrom's contribution to envisioning alternatives in the management of commons was crucial. But, above all, thanks to the visibility provided by her Nobel Prize to this previously less-considered topic, it sparked a broader debate on the commons' potential to foster a more responsible approach to resource preservation in the Anthropocene.[12]

The concept of "commons" is extremely broad and notoriously difficult to define. As the sociologist Sébastien Shulz underlined in our conversation on the topic of commons, "since the literature on the commons is expanding quickly and sometimes moving in contradictory directions, […] everyone seems to be claiming to be part of the commons today, and this can become unclear."[13]

If we rely solely on the definition provided by one of the most prominent digital commons, Wikipedia, we may fail to grasp the complexity of the concept: "The Digital Library of the Commons defines 'commons' as a general term for shared resources in which each stakeholder has an equal interest."[14]

To move beyond this general definition, this chapter will trace the connection between commons and free open source culture through a literature review, and will narrow the broad definition of commons to focus on specific interpretations that will guide our exploration of alternative models in higher education in art and design. From Elinor Ostrom's Nobel Prize-winning work to Hardin's "tragedy of the commons," we will show that many core values of the commons' movement have long been embraced and practiced by communities within the free open source culture. We will examine how key figures from the free movement, such as Lawrence Lessig and Aaron Swartz, have championed free exchange, collaborative governance, and cross-disciplinary approaches,

9 "On the Commons: A Public Interview with Massimo De Angelis and Stavros Stavrides - Journal #17," accessed September 22, 2024, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/17/67351/on-the-commons-a-public-interview-with-massimo-de-angelis-and-stavros-stavrides/.

10 "The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel 2009," NobelPrize.org, accessed September 21, 2024, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/economic-sciences/2009/ostrom/l64465-ostrom-williamson-interview-transcript/.

11 "Elinor Ostrom, Nobel 2009 d'économie, théoricienne des 'biens communs,'" June 19, 2012, https://www.lemonde.fr/disparitions/article/2012/06/19/elinor-ostrom-nobel-2009-d-economie-theoricienne-des-biens-communs_1721235_3382.html.

12 These term, broadly defined by Merriam-Webster as "the period of time during which human activities have had an environmental impact on the Earth regarded as constituting a distinct geological time interval," ("Definition of ANTHROPOCENE," October 18, 2024, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Anthropocene), can also be referred to as *Capitalocene* or *Plantationocene*. These more recent terms in the literature emphasize different perspectives on the ecological crisis: Capitalocene focuses on capitalism as the driving

envisioning cyberspace as a fertile ground for the open sharing of information and knowledge.

1.1 A Government, But Not "The State"

Questioned, in 2009, whether self-organization could be a more effective way to manage resources than relying on the market or state, Elinor Ostrom declared:

> "What we have been trying to do is a systematic understanding of when [...] people engage in the transaction of self-organizing and then sustain that organization over time. And they use a variety of forms, so sometimes they create a small government, but that's not 'the state.'"[15]

This concept of a "small government" challenged not only the dichotomy between privatization and state control—laying the foundation for a third way of managing resources—but also the prevailing notion of the "tragedy of the commons,"[16] idea, introduced by the ecologic economist Garrett Hardin in 1968. Hardin stated that individuals, acting in their own self-interest, would inevitably drain shared resources in a world of finite limits:

> "Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit—in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons."[17]

Consequently, according to Hardin, the only way to prevent the exhaustion of common goods is through privatization or direct state management, thereby accepting the inevitability of an economic and societal dichotomy between these two polarities.

1.1.1 The Ecological Turn

Hardin's critique echoes the concerns of earlier ecological thinkers and reflects a long history of anxiety over humanity's inability to preserve natural resources. As far back as ancient Greece, Aristotle addressed human self-interest, noting that individuals may struggle to prioritize the common good over personal gain.[18]

If we focus on designers' perspectives, during the Industrial Revolution, William Morris—founder of the Arts and Crafts movement, early figure in graphic design, and one of the first environmentalist designers—was already warning of the dangers of human greed and highlighted the destructive potential of capitalism on both art and the beauty of the Earth.[19] More recently, the designer and educator Victor Papanek called for designers to take responsibility for the inevitable resources' deterioration caused by unresponsible production:

> "We have moved backwards and are now far from certain that we can expect fresh air, pure drinking water, food that is safe to eat [...]. This raises the question whether designers, architects, and engineers, can be held personally responsible and legally liable for creating tools, objects, appliances, and buildings that bring about environmental deterioration."[20]

These perspectives are rooted in ecological concerns, particularly regarding the exploitation of shared resources that are "natural" (or "bucolic" as Alexandre Monnin introduced in *Les Communs Négatifs de l'Anthopocène*[21]). Despite the different lens through which Ostrom and Hardin grapple with this issue—Ostrom proposing an 'in-between' governance model that emphasizes collective management of resources; Hardin arguing that restricting access is essential to prevent overuse—, both focus on the preservation of 'environmental' commons, such as land and water. Over time, however, the concept of commons has expanded to include knowledge and information as other vital shared goods. Unlike natural resources, which risk exhaustion through overexploitation, knowledge and information grow stronger and more valuable the more they are shared and engaged with, presenting a unique dynamic within the framework of commons. This shift has expanded the commons into the digital realm.

1.1.2 From Natural to Digital

In France, where the State plays a prominent role in the economic and societal regulation, the debate on using commons—and in particular digital commons—as a way to rethink public services has become

force behind environmental degradation, while *Plantationocene* highlights the history of plantations as the origin of modern extractive economies and environmental devastation. (Haraway Dona, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin", Environmental Humanities (2015) 6 (1): 159–165. https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615934).

13 Appendix, p. 73-75

14 "Commons," in Wikipedia, September 16, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.

15 "The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel 2009."

16 Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," Science 162 (1968): 1243–48, https://math.uchicago.edu/~shmuel/Modeling/Hardin,%20Tragedy%20of%20the%20Commons.pdf.

17 *ibid.*

18 Aristotle, Politics, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Digireads.com Publishing, 2017). Book II, ch. 3, p. 53.

19 "The Socialism of William Morris Brought Ecology and Class Struggle Together," accessed September 27, 2024, https://jacobin.com/2023/10/william-morris-ecosocialism-romanticism-labor-news-from-nowhere.

20 Victor Papanek, *The Green Imperative* (New ed) | anglais, Updated édition (London New York: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2021).

21 Emmanuel Bonnet, Diego Landivar, and Alexandre Monnin, *Héritage et fermeture: Une écologie du démantèlement* (Paris: Editions Divergences, 2021).

22 Papanek, *The Green Imperative.*

increasingly central over the past decade. In an interview with Ouishare, Sébastien Shulz—sociologist, activist, and co-founder of *La Société des Communs*,[22] as well as the author of the thesis "*Transformer l'État par les communs numériques: Sociologie d'un mouvement réformateur entre droit, technologie et politique* (1990-2020)"—discusses the paradoxical relationship between the state and the commons, emphasizing how these seemingly incompatible entities can converge. From a political theory perspective, the commons can, after all, serve the broader public interest, aligning with the state's role in foster the 'common good.' Furthermore, as Elinor Ostrom's work shows, for the commons to remain sustainable, the state must respect their rules, and, in some cases, can even strengthen them by incorporating commons principles into legislation or investing in and promoting them. Shulz, thus, asserts that society must move beyond the binary choice of "more state" or "more market" and instead embrace a new democratic framework grounded in dynamics of sharing and collaboration: this shift could reframe economic, social, and environmental challenges, making politics more accessible and engaging for individuals.[23] A significant shift, though, in Shulz's contemporary reconsideration of the commons is the focus on digital commons as innovative tool for the collective gathering and sharing of knowledge. Not only does Shulz place them at the heart of his research, but the *Direction interministérielle du numérique* (DINUM)[24] in France has also made them a central focus of their initiatives. If we look at the *Accélérateur d'initiatives citoyennes* (AIC), led by DINUM in partnership with the *Direction interministérielle de la transformation publique* (DITP), initiative that supports civil society projects that serve the public interest, we see, in its promotional video, Shulz stating:

> "On the one hand, commons can transform the way administrations function from within. This includes making resources openly accessible, fostering more inclusive modes of contribution, and promoting shared governance to reshape public action internally. But there is another crucial aspect: the state can also support the development of digital commons within society. A perfect example of this is the AIC, where the state provides financial and legal aid, and other resources to support the development of digital commons outside of the administration, allowing them to grow within society."[25]

In the same video, Emma Ghariani of DINUM define digital commons as shared resources that are open source and based on open data, where anyone can contribute, and governance is managed by the community of contributors who also maintain the platform.[26] This definition adds complexity to the general concept introduced at the beginning of this chapter, incorporating specific terms such as "open source," "open data," and "[digital] platforms," which situate us within the realm of free open source culture. When we shift the focus from natural resources to knowledge and information, we have to recognize how cyberspace—"the ecosystem that encompass the bioelectronic environment composed by the internet network, telephone wires, coaxial cables, fiber-optic lines or electromagnetic waves"[27] —has been, and still is, the main tool used for open sharing and horizontal collaboration, and how tangible methodologies in this field have been already theorized and practiced by communities like the free movement, and thus, by the free open source culture and community.

1.2 Cyberpace: A Space "In-Between"

Looking back at the transition from the Industrial to the Knowledge Age,[28] the rise of information technologies sparked new hope for emancipation from established power. Cyberspace was seen as a powerful tool for liberation, offering a unique opportunity to challenge existing hierarchies and power structures. Between the 1980s and the end of the twentieth century, cyberspace is still a place where market regulations are inapplicable or unapplied. Therefore, we witnessed the surge of contrasting visions for the possible missions of the internet. The philosophy of the free exchange of knowledge—brought about by activists such as Lawrence Lessig and Aaron Swartz—which fosters openness and collaboration, sets aside the liberal ideal of the conquest of cyberspace as a new market.[29] These alternative models of sharing knowledge and information,

23 Sébastien Shulz, "Transformer l'État Par Les Communs ?," interview by Renée Zachariou, Ouishare, November 20, 2023, https://www.ouishare.net/en/magazine/Transformer-l-Etat-par-les-communs.

24 The Direction interministérielle du numérique (DINUM) is tasked with developing and overseeing the implementation of the French government's digital strategy. Its mission is to create a more efficient, streamlined, and sovereign state through the use of digital technology. "La DINUM," accessed September 27, 2024, https://www.numerique.gouv.fr/dinum/.

25 "Les communs numériques - Vidéo Dailymotion," accessed September 22, 2024, https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8xdkl2,7"40".

26 *ibid.*

27 "'Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age,' Future Insight, Aug. 1994," accessed August 16, 2021, http://www.pff.org/issues-pubs/futureinsights/fi1.2magnacarta.html.

28 "'Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age,' Future Insight, Aug. 1994."

29 Cédric Durand, *Technoféodalisme* (Paris: Zones, 2020)., p. 33.

rooted in hacker and open-source cultures, offered new pathways for decentralization. Virtual communities formed around shared interests, promoted self-production, and challenged the dominance of consumerism. These movements inspired new generations of designers to embrace more socially conscious and autonomous practices, paving the way for communities founded on horizontal collaboration and the free exchange of knowledge. Alternative production models emerged in the legacy of hackers and free open source cultures.

As the report or the Progress and Freedom Foundation foresaw in 1994, "It is clear [...] that cyberspace will play an important role knitting together in the diverse communities of tomorrow, facilitating the creation of 'electronic neighborhoods' bound together not by geography but by shared interests."[30] These communities brought together by the virtual space of the internet provided a new vision in the quest for alternatives to the centralized power, detached by consumerist ambitions and converging towards a radical exploration of new forms of production and distribution. Lawrence Lessig was a pioneer in identifying the potential of cyberspace as a "new society."

1.2.1 Lawrence Lessing: Advocate for Internet Regulation

Law professor, activist, and co-founder of Creative Commons, Lawrence Lessig played a pivotal role in advocating for internet regulation that balances intellectual property rights with individual freedoms. In his 1999 book *Code*, Lessig laid the groundwork for the efforts he would pursue over the next two decades, aiming to recognize cyberspace as a realm of liberation from proprietary and capitalist dynamics—particularly those that enclose knowledge and information:

> "At just about the time when this post-communist euphoria was waning—in the mid-1990s—there emerged in the West another "new society," to many just as exciting as the new societies promised in post-communist Europe. This was cyberspace. First in universities and centers of research, and then within society generally, cyberspace became the new target of libertarian utopianism. Here freedom from the state would reign. If not in Moscow or Tblisi, then here in cyberspace would we find the ideal libertarian society."[31]

Although Lessig draws comparisons between the post-communist situation in Eastern Europe—thus indirectly referencing 'communism'—and the emerging society within cyberspace, he dedicates only a small paragraph to "The Commons" in his book.[32] Nonetheless, alongside that brief mention, key terms emerge—such as "freedom," "openness," and "transparency"—which would become foundational to the free open source culture. It wasn't until later that year, in his paper "Keynote Address: Commons and Code," that he explicitly connected the emerging free movement with the concept of the commons:[33]

> "The Commons—is a part of the real world here and now, that we all enjoy without the permission of anyone. [...] The Internet is a Commons: the space anyone can enter and take what she finds without the permission of a librarian or a promise to pay. The Net is built on a Commons—the code of the world wide web, HTML is a computer language that lays itself open for anyone to see–to see and to steal, and to use as one wants. [...] Open source software is a commons: the source code of at least part of, Linux, for example, lies available for anyone to take, to use, to improve, to advance. No permission is necessary; no authorization may be required. These examples of the Commons that we all know give us a sense of what the essence of a commons is. The point is not that there is no regulation of access or use. [...] But what is not allowed is that access to this property, the access to the Commons, be conditioned upon the will of anyone else. If a Commons is not open for others to take without permission of someone, it has lost the essence of being a Commons."[34]

In these few paragraphs, Lessig laid out the essence of his work for the next two decades. As the cyberspace is a commons, it must remain accessible, and regulations should ensure that the information within it is freely available to all. Moreover, if we imagine cyberspace as a 'space-in-between' —as Ostrom theorized as a third place between state and private market—that is neither governed by profit-driven capitalist

30 "'Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age,' Future Insight, Aug. 1994."
31 Lawrence Lessig, *Code* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999), p.4.
32 *ibid.*, p. 144.
33 It may seem anecdotal, but the etymology of "commons" and "communism" shares the same Latin root, communis, meaning "common" or "shared." This raises the question of whether this etymological connection contributes to the relative absence of the term "commons" within the discourse of the free open source culture, which is deeply rooted in the U.S. and originated at MIT (as previously highlighted in "From Processing to Design: Free Open Source Culture and The Redefinition of Contemporary Graphic Design Practice," section 1.2, p.12). Even though the Communist Control Act of 1954 is no longer enforced, there may still be a cultural resistance to using that word. Interestingly, Creative Commons is one of the few instances where the term "common" explicitly intersects with the free movement and cyberspace—at least in mainstream discourse.
34 Lawrence Lessig, "Keynote Address: Commons and Code", 9 Fordham Intell. Prop. Media & Ent. L.J. 405, 1999. Available at: https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/iplj/vol9/iss2/2

rules nor by governmental regulations, it appears to be an ideal space for establishing new methodologies and organizations for the fair sharing of knowledge and information:

> "what makes cyberspace so different is that it is constituted by laws of nature that we write. What defines the experience that cyberspace is a set of instructions written into code that we or, more precisely, code-writers, author. This Code sets the rules of this space; it regulates behavior in this space; it determines what is possible in the space and what is not possible."[35]

1.2.2 From Code to Creative Commons

Let's go back to the concept of the 'in-between.' In his writings Lessig acknowledge and promote cyberspace as a 'third space,' a realm that offers freedom of creating their own rules and regulations: he saw immense potential in this space for freely sharing information and knowledge. Nevertheless, he grew increasingly frustrated with the rigid dichotomy that governs intellectual property laws, stuck in the binary of "all rights reserved" versus "no rights at all"[36] and that were jeopardizing the freedom that he envisioned.

> "This is, in a fundamental sense, the battle going on in the context of culture today. There is an extraordinary potential enabled by a technology that is increasingly threatened and destroyed. The potential for a different, critical, democratic creativity, is increasingly being forced into last century's model for doing business."[37]

How can we fail to recognize that knowledge and information, as commons, should be freely shared? As already underlined, unlike natural resources, which can be depleted, knowledge and information only grow and spread through sharing. From the mid-1990s through the late 2000s Lessig's focus became to establish fair regulations, proposing a 'third way' for sharing creative works, one that lies between the extremes of strict copyright and the public domain—a battle that would later be taken up, even more radically, by his friend and *protégé*, Aaron Swartz. For more than a decade, Lessig worked to reform these laws, seeking a balanced approach that could regulate and democratize creativity without stifling it.

35 *ibid.*
36 Lawrence Lessig, "The Creative Commons", 65 Mont. L. Rev. (2004), p.11. Available at: https://scholarship.law.umt.edu/mlr/vol65/iss1/1.
37 *ibid.*, p. 12
38 Lessig, "The Creative Commons", p. 11
39 "Homepage," Creative Commons, accessed September 22, 2024, https://creativecommons.org/.
40 "Who We Are," Creative Commons, accessed October 23, 2024, https://creativecommons.org/mission/.
41 Aaron Swartz, *The Boy Who Could Change the World* (New York: Perseus Distribution: The New Press, 2015), p.7.
42 *ibid.*
43 *ibid.*, p. 8

His vision was not "all rights reserved" or "no rights reserved,"[38] a more nuanced framework for intellectual property.

In 2001, alongside Hal Abelson and Eric Eldred, Lessig co-founded Creative Commons, "a global nonprofit organization that empowers individuals to contribute to a thriving commons of shared knowledge and culture. Their mission is to create a framework for openness that can address the world's most pressing challenges and help build a brighter, more equitable future."[39] Through the development of licenses—and their legal framework—Creative Commons allows creators to choose how to share their work, "empowering individuals and communities around the world by equipping them with technical, legal, and policy solutions to enable sharing of knowledge and culture in the public interest."[40] Creative Commons created alternatives to exiting the duality of proprietary control and the public domain and proposing a 'third way,' a space 'in-between,' for sharing knowledge and information.

1.2.3 Aaron Swartz: Hacker "For Good"

We cannot conclude our exploration of the relationship between commons and free open source culture without acknowledging the profound contributions of Aaron Swartz. A computer programmer, writer, political organizer, and internet activist—as well as a friend and *protégé* of Lawrence Lessig—Swartz devoted his life to promoting and defending the free exchange of information and knowledge through the internet. Motivated by a deep sense of injustice over the restrictive nature of sharing contents, he was outraged by what he considered as the unethical creation of artificial scarcity in knowledge, culture, and information.[41] Swartz firmly believed that "a piece of knowledge, unlike physical property, can be shared by large groups without making anyone poorer."[42] A key figure in the free culture movement, he dedicated his life to demonstrating that freely sharing information "could transform society for the better."[43]

Aaron Swartz was a prodigy, captivated by computers from a very young age, finding purpose and meaning in programming. As his brother Ben remarked, "The way Aaron always saw it, [programming] is magic—

it can accomplish things that normal humans can't"[44]. Swartz was just twelve years old, when he developed a pre-version of Wikipedia at home, The Info Network. [45] Even at that early stage, it was clear to him that collaborative work on the internet had the potential to drive societal change.

Before Aaron Swartz, Linus Torvalds had already established the open source framework as a valuable and legitimate collaborative methodology through the development of Linux—open source operating system and a prominent digital commons, recognized globally as a precursor of large-scale free open source practices.[46] However, Swartz drew much of his inspiration from Tim Berners-Lee, the creator of the World Wide Web, who, rather than profiting from what could have been one of the most lucrative inventions of all time, chose to make it freely available to everyone.[47] Throughout his life, Aaron Swartz increasingly aligned his technical expertise as a hacker and programmer with a profound political commitment. Like Tim Berners-Lee, Swartz rejected the start-up culture of Silicon Valley,[48] choosing instead to use his "magical powers" as a hacker "for good" rather than "for making a mountain of cash".[49] It is difficult to summarize the full extent of his contributions: he was part of the team that developed the RSS flux,[50] collaborated in the creation of Reddit, and helped launch Creative Commons. In the mid-2000s, Swartz also played a significant role in the development of Wikipedia, including its governance, and wrote extensively about it—offering deep insights into his views on this groundbreaking commons.[51]

1.2.4 Wikipedia: Commons Within a Commons

Wikipedia is "a free content online encyclopedia written and maintained by a community of volunteers, known as Wikipedians, through open collaboration."[52] It is the most prominent digital commons, and represents a pioneering model of open access and collaborative knowledge-sharing on a global scale. Rooted in the principles of free open source culture, Wikipedia was established with the vision of creating "a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge."[53] "Consistently ranked among the world's 10 most visited websites,"[54] Wikipedia has, since its creation, championed the ideals of communities committed to alternatives to capitalist imperatives, standing apart from profit-driven websites.

The key factor that enabled Wikipedia to thrive is the internet. As Aaron Swartz described it, "the internet is the first medium to make such a project of mass collaboration possible. [...] On the internet, [...] the entire job [...] can be done in spare time by mutual strangers."[55] Considering the vast scale of the project that has been maintained and sustained by its community over the past two decades, it is remarkable to think that such an endeavor could be created and managed through a model of shared governance. But this is not the only aspect that seems to be extraordinary of the project. Before Wikipedia, projects like the Linux operating system had already demonstrated the power of open source methodologies and the ability of online communities to create and sustain complex, significant initiatives. However, as Aaron Swartz pointed out,

> "Building a community is pretty tough; it requires just the right combination of technology and rules and people. [...] But Wikipedia isn't even a typical community. [...] With Wikipedia the goal is building Wikipedia. It's not a community set up to make some other things. It's a community set up to make itself. And since Wikipedia was one of the first sites to do it, we know hardly anything about building communities like that."[56]

This point is crucial, as it highlights a fundamental characteristic of most contemporary digital commons: they function as both the content and the container. In Wikipedia, for example, the commons is embodied in both the knowledge that is collected and shared, and the website itself. Essentially, Wikipedia—and many other digital commons—represent a commons within a commons, as Russian nesting dolls. This concept was already visible in Lawrence Lessig's thinking when he asserted that "The Internet is a Commons: a space where anyone can enter and take what they find" and "The Net is built on a Commons—the code of the world wide web."[57]

When Aaron Swartz declared, "Wikipedia is just too important—both as a resource and as a model—to see fail," he underscored a crucial point. His statement underscored

44 *The Internet's Own Boy: The Story of Aaron Swartz*, Documentary (Participant Media, 2014). 6'11".
45 Swartz, *The Boy Who Could Change the World*, p. 8.
46 Russo, *From Processing to Design*, p. 14.
47 *The Internet's Own Boy: The Story of Aaron Swartz.* 24'44".
48 Russo, *From Processing to Design.*
49 *The Internet's Own Boy: The Story of Aaron Swartz.* 24'13".
50 Acronym for Really Simple Syndication or Rich Site Summary, a family of web feed formats, RSS is a computer document format that enables updates to websites to be easily distributed "RSS." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/RSS. Accessed 27 Oct. 2024.
51 From the mid-2000s onward, he pursued his career as a political activist, focusing, among other things, on the public sharing of scholarly articles locked within private university domains. In the documentary The Internet's Own Boy: The Story of Aaron Swartz, he argues, "It's a legacy that should belong to us as a commons, but instead it has been locked up and put online by a handful of for-profit corporations who then try to get a maximum they can out of it." His relentless activism ultimately contributed to his tragic downfall. He was prosecuted for downloading academic articles from JSTOR, a repository of scholarly works, and he took his own life in January 2013, overwhelmed by the pressure of the legal proceedings he was facing.
52 "Wikipedia," in Wikipedia, October 19, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.
53 Jon Gertner, "Wikipedia's Moment of Truth," The New York Times, July 18, 2023, sec. Magazine, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/18/magazine/wikipedia-ai-chatgpt.html.
54 *ibid.*
55 Swartz, *The Boy Who Could Change the World*, p. 29.
56 *ibid.*, p. 49.
57 Lessig, "Keynote Address: Commons and Code."
58 Lessig, "On the Commons."
59 *ibid.*

both the inherent complexity of the digital commons and the essential role of commoning as an active, ongoing process. The evolution of the digital commons is intrinsically tied to this reciprocal relationship between the community and the act of commoning—each nourishing and sustaining the other. Through the collective practice of commoning, the community maintains both the shared resource and its own social fabric.

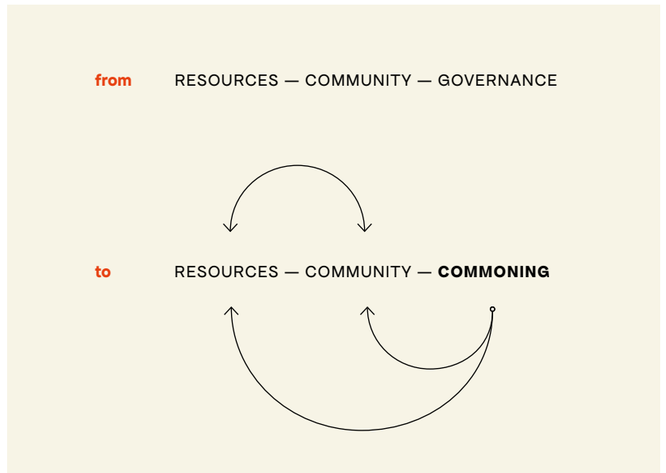
Preliminary Conclusion: Establishing a Definition

In this chapter, we have traced the connection between free open source culture and the concept of commons, demonstrating how these two realms have been closely intertwined, sometimes overlapping, since the rise of information technologies, particularly the internet and cyberspace. We've also briefly touched on how free open source culture relates to the field of design, which we will explore further in the next chapters. With this initial exploration behind us, we can now refine our understanding of the commons. We can define 'commons' as shared resources—whether land, water, knowledge, or information—collectively managed and sustained by a community through self-organized governance. Moreover, Commons represent a 'third way,' distinct from traditional market or state-controlled systems.[58] We have also established that in the case of digital commons, there may be a dual value: the commons serve both as content (the shared resource) and as a container (the platform): this highlights the crucial act of sustaining the platform—the act of 'commoning'—critical to its functioning.

This last aspect is well summarized by Massimo De Angelis, Professor of Political Economy at the University of East London and editor of the online journal The Commoner:

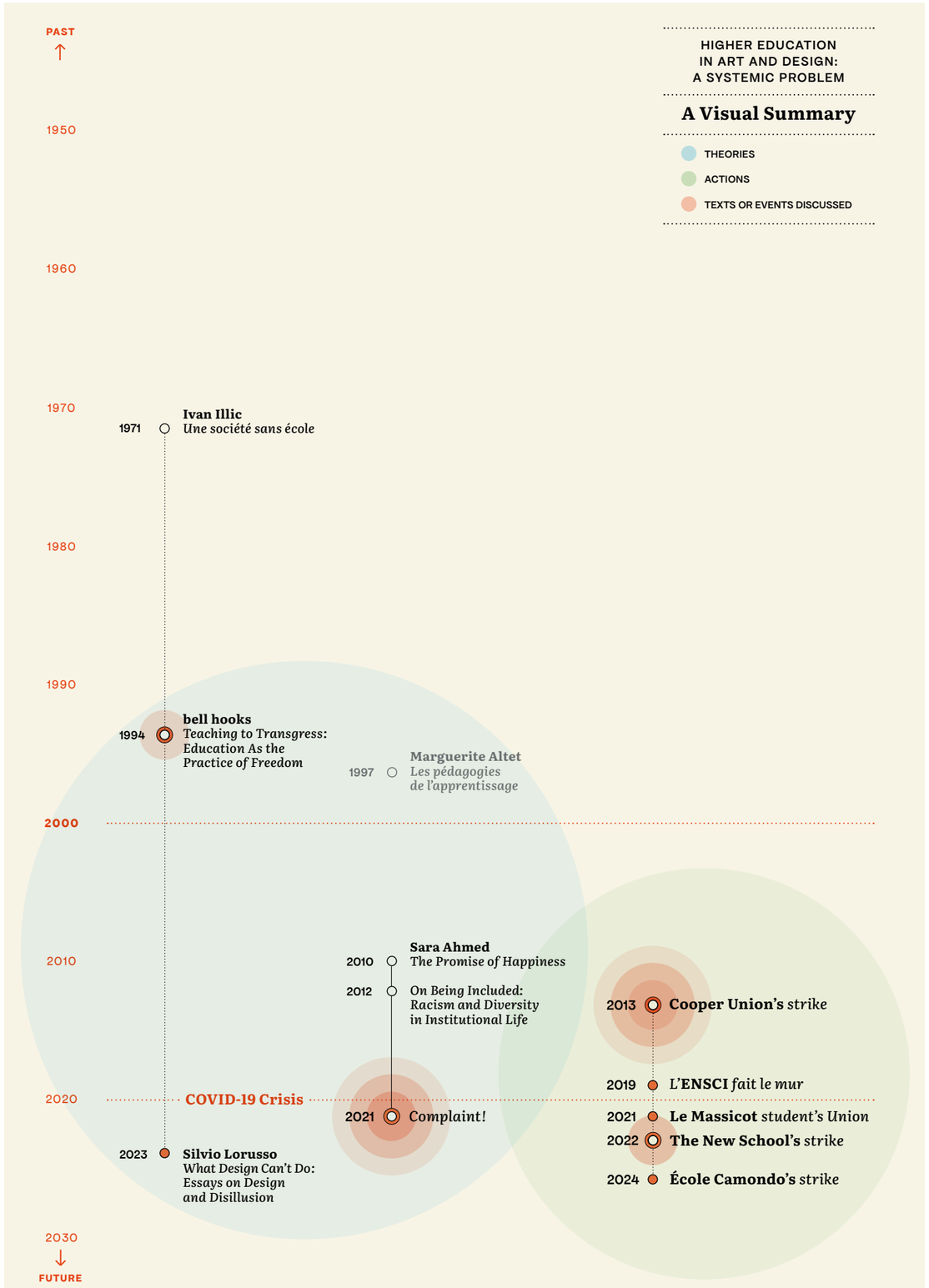
> "Commons are not simply resources we share—conceptualizing the commons involves three things at the same time. First, all commons involve some sort of common pool of resources, understood as non-commodified means of fulfilling people needs. Second, the commons are necessarily created and sustained by communities [...] Communities are sets of commoners who share these resources and who define for themselves the rules according to which they are accessed and used. [...] In addition to these two elements—the pool of resources and the set of communities—the third and most important element in terms of conceptualizing the commons is the verb "to common"—the social process that creates and reproduces the commons."[59]

The triad 'resources,' 'community,' and 'commoning'—understood as the social process that both creates and sustains the commons, including governance and community-led self-management—will serve as our compass throughout this research. These three pillars will help us examine how educational projects have integrated this approach and how it fosters a more sustainable and inclusive model for knowledge sharing. In this context, it is essential to acknowledge that the concept of the commons is rooted in economic and sociological theory. While I do not claim to be an economist, the principles articulated by De Angelis strongly resonate with the core values of free open source culture, which originates from and is deeply embedded within design communities. By drawing this parallel, we can explore how such economic theories might inspire new models applicable to other societal structures—particularly in rethinking design schools as a 'third way' in higher education, one that merges traditional academia with community-driven, open source principles. •



ABOVE **With the emergence of digital commons, where the community itself becomes a resource, commoning emerges as the social process that creates and sustains the commons—encompassing both the community and its shared resources.**

58 Lessig, "On the Commons."
59 *ibid.*



[CHAPTER TWO]

Higher Education in Art and Design: A Systemic Problem

Having established a foundational understanding of the commons and demonstrated how the sociological evolution of this economic concept can serve as an insightful lens for examining the current state of art and design education, this chapter will contextualize the crisis facing art and design higher education institutions, framing it as a systemic issue that calls for a design-oriented approach. Institutions today face pressing questions of value, as students and educators alike challenge the worth of a diploma—considering its high financial cost. Nevertheless, degrees remain valuable and, in many cases, necessary for entry into the professional market.

To fully address this crisis, it's crucial to define what we mean by 'institution.' Here, 'higher education institutions' refer not only to the physical space of schools but also to the organizational frameworks that define them, encompassing "routines, procedures, conventions, roles, strategies, organizational forms, and technologies."[62] Sara Ahmed—an independent feminist scholar and writer whose research focuses on institutional cultures.[63]—further deepens this definition in *On Being Included*, explaining that institutions are understood not solely as "containers" of activities but as entities whose "activities shape the sense of an institution or even institutional sense."[64] In this perspective, an institution's identity is perpetually constructed through the interactions and practices that occur within it. This chapter will explore these interactions and practices highlighting key economic and social dynamics that increasingly distance higher education institutions from their original mission of educating the next generation of professionals. Through insights from members of the institutional ecosystem and references to foundational works on education and pedagogy, we'll underscore that addressing these issues requires focusing

I feel that the way I teach has been fundamentally structured by the fact that I never wanted to be an academic. [...] I think that's been meaningful, because it's freed me up to feel that the professor is something I become as opposed to a kind of identity that's already structured and that I carry with me into the classroom.[60]

— BELL HOOKS, 1994

I want to think specifically about institutional life: not only how institutions acquire a life of their own but also how we experience institutions or what it means to experience something as institutional. We might also need to consider how we experience life within institutions, what it means for life to be 'an institutional life.'[61]

— SARA AHMED, 2012

60 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education As the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 133.
61 Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 22.
62 James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1989), p. 22.
63 "Bio," Sara Ahmed, accessed November 10, 2024, https://www.saranahmed.com/bio-cv.
64 Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, p. 21.

not only on pedagogy but also on the social fabric and networks that define the educational experience.

2.1 The Economic Model: Perspectives

In November 2022, part-time faculty members at The New School in New York, which encompasses the Parsons School of Design, staged a three-week strike to protest low pay and unsatisfactory working conditions. This strike drew attention to the stark disparity between faculty salaries and administrative compensation. Faculty argued that, despite inflation and the challenges brought by the pandemic, their wages had only marginally increased, while a disproportionate share of the university's expenses continued to funnel into administrative salaries.[65] The strike eventually concluded following an agreement between the administration and the union, but this event, following the notable 2013 student protests at Cooper Union, unveiled a deepening crisis in American design higher education and was a milestone for private and prestigious universities. Especially in the U.S., the increasingly gap between investments in administrative structures and the actual needs of educators and students reflects an established prioritization of prestige and expansion over quality of education.[66] Since the 1980s, we witness in the U.S., and in some regions of Europe, how universities have embraced a business model emphasizing growth, exacerbating tensions between their educational mission and the competitive drive for status and revenue. As a striking example, in Europe, we are witnessing the rise of educational groups like Galileo Global Education[67]—which includes sixty-one art and design schools such as Penninghen, Lisaa, and Strate—or AD Education[68]—which comprises institutions like l'École Condé and ECV—which are backed by investment funds and prioritize financial profitability as a primary objective. This model raises serious questions about the sustainability and integrity of higher education as a space for genuine learning and equitable treatment for both its academic workforce and students. It also prompts a reflection on the normalization and globalization of design education as it aligns with market-driven objectives.

Recent strikes in the U.S. have, in turn, echoed in France, revealing a broader systemic crisis that extends to schools also operating under financial models less dependent on capital and private funding. Although French public institutions traditionally rely on state support, recent governmental budget cuts are compromising both the quality and sustainability of these schools. Faculty members' strike at schools like *École Camondo* illustrate educators' calls for improved conditions amid mounting financial and administrative challenges.[69] The suspension of the *École des Beaux-Arts* de Lyon's graphic design master's program further underscores how reduced funding threatens design programs.[70] This collective turmoil demonstrates that even publicly funded institutions, under economic pressures, are struggling to align their operations with their core educational missions.

2.1.1 Inventing Business Opportunities

These examples illustrate the challenges in making the current economic model supporting higher education in art and design throughout the Western world sustainable, unveiling potentially severe consequences for the institutions' ability to meet their original mission. However, it would be overly simplistic to label the model as fundamentally flawed or portray institutions as purely exploitative entities seeking profit at students' expense. The reality is more complex, as sustaining a school involves navigating financial challenges that often shift its trajectory toward capitalist priorities. Emanuele Soldini, Chief Operating Officer of IED— one of Italy's leading private design schools—, when asked about the reasons of school's significant expansion both in Italy and internationally, remarked:

> "If you want a more technical reason, but just as valid, it's because we need to find alternative ways to obtain the resources necessary to do everything we'd like to do. We don't receive public funding, so we finance ourselves entirely through student fees. Our budget is always under pressure, [...] we cut costs, when possible, to remain efficient. We are an expensive school, but the resources almost never allow us to do everything we want. For instance, paying teachers more, offering more merit-based scholarships, or providing more extracurricular activities. In short, there are always three options: raise fees, lower costs, or invent new business opportunities by opening new activities. Raising fees penalizes a large number of students, cutting costs doesn't guarantee success, and opening new ventures in other markets presents a significant growth opportunity."[71]

"Inventing new business opportunities" is a lens through which also public funded school approach the financial tension. At ENSCI, for instance, a French public school largely funded by government resources, revenue generation depends also on partnerships with external companies—becoming in some cases the "clients" for students' projects—and continuing education programs—which are primarily funded by tuition fees paid by enrolled students.

These dynamics highlight the difficulty of sustaining an art and design school when the cost per student for the institution is substantial. Nevertheless, a common issue exacerbating tensions between school management and the community is the perceived lack of transparency in financial allocations. One of the foremost student grievances, especially in private schools, often revolves according to interviewed students around a "lack of transparencies" about "where the money is going," that reflects a deeper issue: a communication gap between administration and students.

If we look at The School for Poetic Computation (SFPC)—one of the first significant examples of alternative pedagogical projects conceived by the free open source community in the U.S.—it has shown, since its first iteration, full financial transparency by publishing financial records on a public GitHub repository—a platform synonymous with open source sharing. This principle stands in contrast to the profit-driven models criticized by Zach Lieberman, SFPC co-founder, who, through his experiences in New York and observing the Cooper Union protests, reflected on the balance between educational costs and value. By disclosing detailed financial data, Lieberman aimed to foster community engagement and provide insights for those considering similar educational ventures. This dedication to transparency is integral to building trust and collaboration within the community.

Exploring sustainable economic models for art and design schools is undoubtedly complex. As Simon d'Hénin, designer and educator at ENSCI, points out in his interview:

> "So, we're looking for models, but every time we add a discipline, a dimension, an economic model, the challenge is that it puts pressure on the principle of individualized curriculum, the student-centered pedagogy. [...] We're all somewhat in project mode, so we make concessions, but if you keep making concessions, it's like the story of the shrinking leather: as you stretch it in all directions, it gets thinner. The risk we see is losing sight of why we do things and why we do them this way. It's complicated because it requires everyone to be aware of the educational ambition. When I say this, I mean the staff, the teaching staff, and the students. It's a marriage, a meeting. We're capable of doing this. You're capable of confronting it and bringing something to it. But it's a mutual contribution that we expect from the meeting with the students. Today, I'm not sure that's entirely clear for all applicants to the school."[72]

The connection between the economic model and a school's pedagogical ambitions is profound, revealing the complexity of the broader educational landscape. While financial models are the most visible aspect of this issue, they represent only part of a deeper, multifaceted problem. Central to understanding the crisis in design education is recognizing, of course, that financial pressures are tightly interwoven with capitalist market influences. Nevertheless, to fully grasp the scope of this crisis, it is essential to examine the interconnected challenges that impact the entire design school ecosystem and reveal its systemic nature.

2.1.2 Accreditations as Standardization Process

Another major factor impacting the quality of art and design education is the increasing pressure from accreditation bodies—both in France and the U.S.—, which grant schools the authority to issue official diplomas and degrees. This pressure is a significant concern for academic leaders in design schools, where the need to adhere to rigid evaluation standards often conflicts with maintaining

65 Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, "New School and Parsons School of Design Adjunct Professors Go on Strike," The New York Times, November 16, 2022, sec. New York, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/16/nyregion/new-school-parsons-strike-walkout.html.
66 *The Ivory Tower*.
67 "Ecoles - Galileo Global Education France," October 20, 2017, https://www.ggeedu.fr/schools/, https://www.ggeedu.fr/schools/.
68 "Home page," accessed November 9, 2024, https://ad-education.com/.
69 "https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2024/04/03/ecole-camondo-en-greve-depuis-sept-semaines-des-enseignants-reclament-une-revision-de-leur-statut_6225804_3224.html" accessed November 2, 2024.
70 "L'école des beaux-arts de Lyon suspend son master en design graphique," Le Quotidien de l'Art, June 13, 2024, https://www.lequotidiendelart.com/articles/25823-l-%C3%A9cole-des-beaux-arts-de-lyon-suspend-son-master-en-design-graphique.html.
71 Appendix, p. xx
72 *ibid.*, p. xx

the unique teaching approaches that define each institution. The inflexible structure of institutional frameworks poses significant challenges, particularly in art and design schools in which fostering "lateral thinking"[73] and encouraging broader perspectives are fundamental: this rigidity contradicts the very ideals these schools are built upon. In my role as chair of an academic department at Paris College of Art, I frequently revise departmental competencies— competencies we aim for our students to have achieved upon obtaining their diploma—to align with accreditation standards. In a recent working session on the subject, a member of my leadership has shared how accrediting bodies are becoming increasingly strict in their evaluations, prompting us to refer to competencies from other American schools to ensure compliance with these growing expectations. Although this may seem anecdotal, it exemplifies a broader issue: as teaching models and the competencies we aim to transmit become homogenized to satisfy accreditation requirements, the diversity in design education risk being stifled. This shift results not even in responsiveness to market needs, but in conformity to accreditation criteria. The intensifying rigidity undermines the unique potential of various institutions: if all schools are compelled to adhere to the same standards, the distinctive qualities that set them apart lose their significance.

If the accreditation process is demanding for private institutions and sometimes exhaustingly long—Paris College of Art has been pursuing an additional American accreditation for the past decade and the process is still in progress—, public institutions also face continuous challenges through evaluations to maintain their accreditation status:

> "In the life of any institution, there are periods shaped by external questions, like accreditation and evaluation. We [ENSCI] are an institution with a public service delegation for design education and research, and the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Industry and Economy provide us with funding to fulfill this mission. Since we receive funding, there is inevitably a time when we are evaluated on what we do and how we do it. In recent years, we have gone through several evaluation periods: an audit by the Court of Accounts, a mission from the National Assembly on art school education, an internal audit by the Ministry of Culture on art and design schools. [...] There is also the HCERES report from the Haut Conseil de l'évaluation de la recherche et de l'enseignement supérieur (High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education). [...] The big question is how to perpetuate a system that relies heavily on experience transmission and relationships, rather than written processes."[74]

Accreditation holds critical importance not just pedagogically, as Simon d'Hénin underscore, but also for ensuring that institutions can continue granting degrees and diplomas. While non-accredited educational projects could spark inspiration in design education methodologies and models, the value of formal diplomas remains unquestioned in this research. In an era marked by 'over-diplomation,' most designers pursue education beyond a bachelor's degree. Insights gathered through discussions with industry professionals reveal that hiring practices in France often prioritize candidates based on the school they come from, reflecting the perceived value of specific diplomas. This preference limits opportunities for unconventional profiles, including those who dropped or had unorthodox paths is their academic trajectories.

Another important aspect of accreditations, particularly in France, highlights a shift toward standardized competencies and a growing emphasis on professionalization within school expectations. In France, it is particularly notable that diplomas from art and design schools are increasingly overseen by the *Ministère du Travail* rather than the *Ministère de la Culture*. A growing number of private institutions now hold RNCP (*Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles*) accreditation, placing them under the jurisdiction of the *Ministère du Travail*; within the design bachelor level alone, this encompasses 485 programs.[75] By contrast, public institutions remain accredited by the *Ministère de la Culture*, with only 45 art and design schools across France.[76] Their guiding principles are fundamentally different.

The RNCP's national framework categorizes qualification levels according to knowledge and skills acquired, specifying that "for each level, it defines three descriptors:

73 Edward De Bono, *Lateral Thinking: A Textbook of Creativity* (Ward Lock Educational Co Ltd, 1970).
74 Appendix, p. 75-78.
75 "*Catalogue Licences v3.8.0*," accessed November 9, 2024, https://cataloguelm.campusfrance.org/licence/#/domain.
76 "*Les 45 écoles supérieures d'art et design publiques du ministère de la Culture*," accessed November 9, 2024, https://andea.fr/ecoles/les-ecoles-dart-et-design-publiques-sous-tutelle-du-ministere-de-la-culture/.

the complexity of knowledge associated with the relevant professional activity, the degree of expertise—primarily evaluated by the complexity and technical nature of a task or activity within a work process—and the level of responsibility and autonomy within the organizational structure." This framework places a strong emphasis on professional skills and technical competencies.[77]

Public school accreditations, on the other hand, reflect a different ethos, as their brochure states: "An art school is, above all, a place of research and creation where knowledge and practices are transmitted through diverse modes of engagement." They emphasize that "the distinctiveness of the education provided lies in its professional focus, fostering a continuous exchange between theory and practice." Further, "the progressive acquisition of technical, practical, and theoretical knowledge, along with the multidisciplinary and transversal approach characteristic of art schools, enables students to develop their personal research within a framework that is broadly open to the world." Here, the focus remains on personal research and transdisciplinarity, underscoring a holistic integration of theory and practice.[78]

This shift toward a work-oriented accreditation model reflects a broader transformation in educational standards, emphasizing the production of "technical professionals" over the cultivation of "critical thinkers." To align with these frameworks, schools are compelled to prioritize hard skills over soft skills, often sidelining critical thinking in favor of job-specific competencies.

This raises an essential question: what should students truly gain from their education? Should they emerge primarily as skilled productive professionals, or as thinkers equipped with a critical perspective that enables them to question and reshape their fields?

2.1.3 The Purpose of Education

If I were to align myself with one of the perspectives about design education that Silvio Lorusso outlines in *What Design Can't Do: Essays on Design and Disillusion*, I would choose the idealistic, optimistic stance:

> "[...] Both students and faculty conceive the school through either a materialist or idealist lens. Materialists share a pragmatic focus on future employment, skills, market needs. Idealists, in turn, are divided between pessimists and optimists. Pessimist idealists argue that the school is a place of discipline and repression. They also lament the subjugation of education to the labour market. Schools, according to this point of view, are becoming a factory, only apparently egalitarian, for corporate executives, freelancers, workers or even the unemployed. Optimists see the school as a space for liberation through the exercise of critical thinking and the suspension of familiar preconceptions. On one side the pessimist Ivan Illich, on the other the optimist bell hooks."[79]

Like hooks, I am not interested in rejecting academia but in transforming it to respond to contemporary challenges, so it becomes a space that equips students to engage meaningfully with the world. "The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy," bell hooks asserts, adding, "I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom."[80] Higher education, then, should foster critical thinking that empowers students to challenge the capitalist imperatives that increasingly dictate educational objectives, shaped under the relentless pressure of market demands.

Lorusso, however, extends his reflection further, questioning the balance between professional training and critical thinking development, suggesting that the truth likely lies 'in-between:'

> "Everybody [Materialists and Idealists] is right, at least partially. How do we then merge their respective positions into a model? Claiming that art and design schools are an integral part of the real world is not enough. Nor is it correct to contrast professional training with the development of critical thinking. For example, are we really sure that a professionalizing school cannot be liberating, or that emancipation is not, in some cases, a form of discipline?"[81]

Given the current trajectory of higher education in art and design—with its growing focus on cultivating "productive" designers molded by standardized processes—I find it essential to advocate for a stance that places

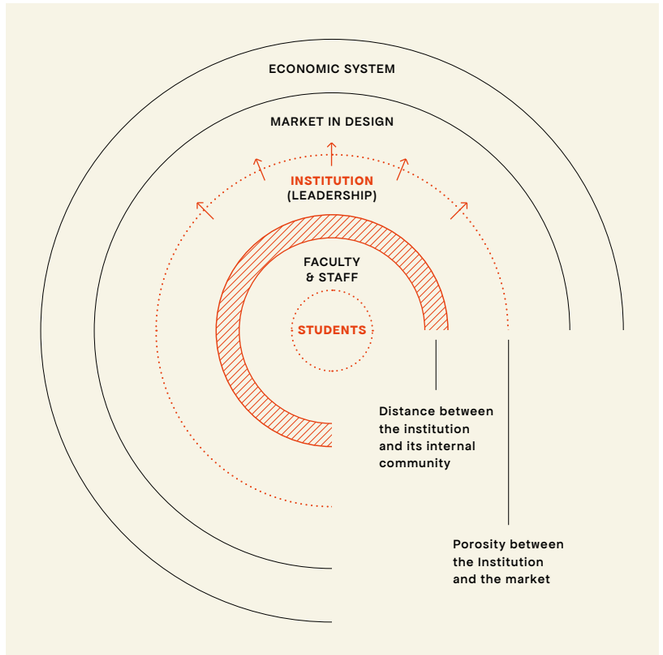
77 "*Le cadre national des certifications professionnelles | Travail-emploi.gouv.fr | Ministère du Travail et de l'Emploi*," January 14, 2019, https://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/le-cadre-national-des-certifications-professionnelles.
78 "*L'enseignement Supérieur Culture 2019-2020*," accessed November 9, 2024.
79 Silvio Lorusso, *What Design Can't Do: Essays on Design and Disillusion, 1er édition* (Eindhoven: Set Margins' publications, 2023), p. 252.
80 hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, p. 12.
81 Lorusso, *What Design Can't Do*, p. 252.

critical thinking at the core, rebalancing these approaches to equip students with a deeper understanding of design's role in the contemporary landscape. In a rapidly evolving world where technological acceleration leads to tool obsolescence and resource depletion, significant shifts in our practices will be necessary. Here, technical training alone is not only insufficient but can also become an illusion.

It is commonly observed that, when professional designers are asked about what they seek in recent graduates joining their agencies, they often express a need for immediate proficiency and production capability. This frequently translates, in their view, to young designers who are adept with industry-standard tools. As one digital agency professional noted in one of our conversations, "Our observation as a digital agency is that there seems to be a lack in art and design schools of the 'professionalizing' fundamentals based on the tools that the market will be using." Moreover, other professionals express frustration over the lack of professional maturity in new graduates—or even in interns, who are increasingly seen as the first "rung" on the professional ladder—, highlighting a perceived gap between academic training and practical industry expectations. Young professionals are not sufficiently trained to respond to market's standards.

Nevertheless, if we examine the etymology of the word 'education,' we find that it does not align with the market-driven notion of 'training.' Derived from the Latin *educare* or *educere*, meaning 'to elevate' or 'to nourish,'[82] the term implies a purpose that goes beyond solely technical preparation. In contrast, 'training' traces back to the Latin *trahere* and the French *trainer*, meaning 'to pull' or 'to drag.'[83] If we analyze the French *former* (translation of the English word training), it finds its roots in the Latin word *formare*, meaning 'to give shape' or 'to mold.'[84] This analysis reveals how the mission of education—focused on elevating individuals to be independent, autonomous, and capable of self-directed learning—diverges from training's intent to shape professionals to fit a predefined mold.

The confusion between the purpose of education and the market's expectations has progressively shifted the position of institutions of higher education in art and design. Increasingly, we overlook the role that agencies, studios, and design professionals play in 'training' young professionals, a responsibility that once belonged to the professional world itself. Instead, this role has been gradually offloaded onto higher education institutions—with a concerning trend of passing it down to even lower levels of education. As a result, students (and faculty) now face heightened pressure, feeling they must carry the sole responsibility of becoming highly efficient and productive professionals. This shift places an unrealistic burden on educational institutions and students alike, who are tasked with molding themselves into industry-ready workers rather than engaging in a broader, transformative journey during their years of study.



BELOW **The institutions increasingly align themselves with market dynamics and economic systems, moving away from their original mission of 'educating.' This shift creates a growing disconnect with the internal community, which feels increasingly distanced from the institution's ethos.**

2.2 Discomfort and Distress

The dynamics we've outlined—economic models in higher education, standardized accreditation processes, and market-driven pressures to produce high-performing graduates—are increasingly widening the gap between institutions and their leaderships and those directly involved in the educational experience. Institutions are perpetuating dynamics that the design field itself increasingly critiques as central issues: economic and social frameworks are

saturated with profit-driven motivations and perpetuate social injustice withing the institutions themselves.

The individuals most impacted by these dynamics—students, faculty, and staff—experience a growing disconnect from their institutions, which fuels discomfort that often translates into genuine distress. Students, in particular, are calling for schools to become safe, reflective, and inclusive spaces where they can pursue meaningful learning and engage in practices rooted in social relevance and impact.

It's important to underline that communities drawn to art and design schools often come from marginalized or fragile backgrounds, seeking academic trajectories that could integrate self-reflection and self-expression into their practice, which can be both cathartic and healing. Many are attracted to practices that emphasize 'making' and 'hands-on' work, allowing them to step away from more standardized, rule-bound academic paths. By following these creative trajectories, they hope their individuality will be seen as an asset to their practice, finding in art education an alternative experience that prioritizes diversity over conformity. Yet, they frequently find that higher education institutions end up reproducing the same patterns of oppression they encounter in their daily lives.

2.2.1 Raising Voices for Social Justice

If we examine the recent shift in student-led research at Paris College of Art, we see a wave of thesis projects—within the Communication Design department, which I oversee—that focus on social justice and inclusion, themes that have gained urgency since the pandemic exposed deep-seated issues affecting marginalized communities. In 2020-21 alone, students tackled topics such as dismantling gender preconceptions (FKTB—F*ck the Binary by Chloe Tournier-Décret), transitional feminism (Latinas Diversas by Claudia Murillo), immigration injustice (XQSoyLatino by Mercedes de la Parra), and the underrepresentation of POC communities in art and design (Good Deeds by Sara Biatchinyi and Aika Cherdabayeva). More recently, Seb Callaway's thesis "Collective Piercing: Puncture as a Praxis of Queer, Marginal Being" explores "how queering design practices can disrupt dominant power systems while preserving the radical, illegible qualities of marginality."[85]

These examples illustrate how students are actively reclaiming the 'school space' as their own, aiming to transform it into safe environments where they can voice their discomfort with contemporary society and use school as a 'resonance chamber' for marginalized voices.

In the French public-school landscape, we see social and political protests frequently take the form of strikes and collective actions—reflecting a deeply rooted French tradition of protest and civic engagement. In 2019, in one of the most significant recent protests at ENSCI students opposed the appointment of a new director, Rémy Fenzy, imposed by the *Ministère de la Culture* and the *Ministère des Finances*, who jointly oversee the school. Operating under the banner *l'ENSCI fait le mur*, the protest is symbolized by a physical barrier—a wall—at the entrance to prevent the new director's access. This action underscored the students' desire to preserve the school's distinct pedagogical identity, rooted in fostering their autonomy and involvement in school's decision-making. "In essence, the ENSCI student collective denounces the 'standardization of major creative institutions, which tends to smooth out the unique qualities of each school.'"[86] Students argue that ENSCI, with its legacy of innovative student-centered pedagogy, "deserves better than arbitrary decision-making and short-sighted management"[87] and are pushing for transparency and inclusion in decision-making.[88]

Another powerful example of students reclaiming their schools as spaces for social justice and inclusion is the formation of *Le Massicot*, a French student union founded in 2021, "in-between two confinements."[89] Recognizing the disparities and lack of coordinated representation across art and design schools, *Le Massicot* aims to connect students and strengthen the social fabric among institutions. In their manifesto, they highlight the worsening financial precarity in art and design education, exacerbated by the health crisis, and expose the oppressive dynamics many students face, including racism, sexism, ableism, and LGBTQI-phobia. These issues have prompted the rise of activist groups advocating for a more inclusive environment, alongside concrete actions such as reimbursing enrollment fees for scholarship students in regional schools, providing free menstrual

82 Olivetti Media Communication-Enrico Olivetti, "*DIZIONARIO LATINO OLIVETTI - Latino-Italiano*," accessed December 18, 2024, https://dizionario-latino.com/dizionario-latino-italiano.php?parola=educare.

83 Olivetti Media Communication-Enrico Olivetti, "*DIZIONARIO LATINO OLIVETTI - Latino-Italiano*," accessed December 18, 2024, https://dizionario-latino.com/dizionario-latino-italiano.php?lemma=TRAHO100.

84 Olivetti Media Communication-Enrico Olivetti, "*DIZIONARIO LATINO OLIVETTI - Latino-Italiano*," accessed December 18, 2024, https://dizionario-latino.com/dizionario-latino-italiano.php?lemma=FORMO100.

85 Seb Callaway, *Collective Piercing: Puncture as a Praxis of Queer, Marginal Being* (bachelor's thesis, Paris College of Art, 2024).

86 "*Les élèves d'une école de design dressent un mur de parpaings contre leur nouveau directeur*," November 19, 2019, https://www.telerama.fr/scenes/les-eleves-dune-ecole-de-design-dressent-un-mur-de-parpaings-contre-leur-nouveau-directeur,n6522757.php.

87 *ibid.*

88 "*L'ENSCI FAIT LE MUR devient l'ENSCI en MOUVEMENT !*," November 29, 2019, https://www.ensci.com/actualites/une-actu?tx_news_ "Des étudiants en art et design lancent un syndicat, le Massicot," Le Quotidien de l'Art, February 3, 2022, https://www.lequotidiendelart.com/articles/21210-des-%C3%A9tudiants-en-art-et-design-lancent-un-syndicat-le-massicot.html.

89 "*Des étudiants en art et design lancent un syndicat, le Massicot*," Le Quotidien de l'Art, February 3, 2022, https://www.lequotidiendelart.com/articles/21210-des-%C3%A9tudiants-en-art-et-design-lancent-un-syndicat-le-massicot.html.

products, and implementing preferred name changes for transgender students.[90] Additionally, they voice concerns about the increasing commercialization of their institutions, where commercial partnerships and campus rentals often compromise educational priorities—trends seemingly encouraged by governing ministries. The union also criticizes the undemocratic governance in these schools, where student participation in decision-making processes is limited or disregarded and underscore a widespread lack of awareness about student rights, which hinders students' ability to defend themselves in both individual and collective situations.

2.2.2 Mental Health: A Challenge

The previous examples underscored how the discussion surrounding diversity and inclusion in art schools has gained significant traction, particularly since the pandemic, which exacerbated issues of exclusion and mental distress. Feelings of rejection or isolation within institutions, combined with the traumatic effects of confinement, have led to a marked increase in cases of mental health struggles among students.[91]

Schools have responded to the rising mental health needs by creating systems to help students voice their concerns, yet the numbers illustrate a critical need for more comprehensive support. For example, at IED in Italy, since the establishment of an inclusion office in 2020, following COVID-19, the number of students seeking help has increased, multiplying from around 30 cases to over 300 last year in Milan alone.[92] Beyond institutional structures, some unofficial support systems are sometimes emerging. Victor Senave, who co-chairs the Design for Social Impact program at PCA, highlights how informal communication can play a crucial role:

> "Linda [Jarvin] and I also communicate a lot about how the students are experiencing the program, because it's short and intense. It's important for us to keep track of their progress but also their mental well-being. We remain attentive to their mindset throughout the program."[93]

This informal approach underscores the importance of community care and direct engagement. These systems are, however, insufficient to address the escalating mental health challenges facing both students and other member of school ecosystem. At Paris College of Art, since the pandemic, we have observed a significant rise in burnout cases, particularly among staff members. This trend is largely driven by the precarity caused by the economic fragility of institutions in the aftermath of COVID-19 crisis. These challenges have resulted in understaffed teams, low salaries, and an increasing reliance on part-time positions, further exacerbating the pressures faced by staff.

Economic challenges and precarity also compound students' mental health struggles. Higher education remains largely a privilege. In the U.S., tuition is prohibitively expensive, leaving many with lifelong debt unless they obtain full scholarships.[94] Public education in France is more affordable but highly selective—for instance, ENSCI in France admits only 40 to 50 students in its first-year cohort, roughly 7% of applicants[95]—and these programs (both private and public) demand full-time engagement, making it challenging for students without financial aid to support themselves. When they work outside school, this dual burden of coursework and external work can cause exhaustion, affecting academic performance and risking the loss of scholarships. One PCA graduate expressed relief upon transitioning to full-time work after graduation, noting that it felt easier than juggling two jobs alongside her studies. Similarly, a student at IED described the strain of commuting daily from the outskirts of Milan—often following a full day of classes—and then working on assignments, all due to her inability to afford housing closer to campus.

As a result, design schools often lack socioeconomic diversity, as only those who can shoulder the financial burden manage to thrive, while others face burnout and academic challenges. This reinforces a systemic barrier to access, perpetuating educational inequality and positioning design practice as, often, a privilege, adding an additional layer of distress to students' educational journeys.

2.2.3 Discomfort as a Tool for Change

Students and faculty sometimes attempt to raise their voices and address the issues that oppress them within educational institutions. However, the journey toward a truly inclusive and diverse environment—where

90 "*Des étudiants en art et design lancent un syndicat, le Massicot.*"
91 "Https://Www.Lemonde.Fr/Campus/Article/2022/01/03/Troubles-Anxieux-Depressions-Les-Etudiants-Particulierement-Affectes-Par-La-Crise-Sanitaire_6108017_4401467.Html," accessed December 18, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/campus/article/2022/01/03/troubles-anxieux-depressions-les-etudiants-particulierement-affectes-par-la-crise-sanitaire_6108017_4401467.html.
92 Appendix, p. 84–86.
93 *ibid.*, p. 89–90.
94 Emily Withnall, "For Some Young People, a College Degree Is Not Worth the Debt," The New York Times, January 13, 2024, sec. Business, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/13/business/college-dropout-debt.html.
95 "*Fiche Formation - Ecole Nationale Supérieure de Création Industrielle - Les Ateliers (Paris 11e Arrondissement - 75) Formation Des Écoles Supérieure d'art Bac + 5 - Créateur Industriel - Candidats*," accessed December 18, 2024, https://dossier.parcoursup.fr/Candidats/public/fiches/afficherFicheFormation?g_ta_cod=26196.

oppressive dynamics, whether economic or social, experienced in broader society are dismantled—seems long and still out of reach.

In 2016, Sara Ahmed publicly announced her resignation from the role of director of the prestigious Center for Feminist Research at Goldsmiths, University of London, showing her disillusionment with the institution's handling of its anti-sexual harassment commission, in which she had been actively involved. Ahmed observed that the commission was being instrumentalized by university leadership as a public relations tool to enhance the institution's image, rather than implementing meaningful measures to address and eradicate sexual violence.[96] This pivotal experience marked a turning point in her career, when she started publishing as an independent scholar, embodying her commitment to feminist research free from institutional constraints. During the recent French release of *Manuel rabat-joie féministe* (La Découverte), *Vandalisme queer* (Burn Août), and *Vivre une vie féministe* (Hors d'atteinte) at the bookstore *Les Mots à la Bouche* in Paris, Sara Ahmed was asked about the reasons behind her resignation:

> "There were many reasons for my resignation. But what I can say is that I left my position as a professor at a university because of the institution's refusal to acknowledge a series of cases of sexual harassment that had occurred there. I resigned because I could no longer endure it. For months, even years, I had been working with a group of six doctoral students to push the institution to recognize these issues of sexual harassment. All we were asking for was an acknowledgment that investigations into sexual harassment had taken place within the institution. Yet all we encountered was a persistent silence, as if the university was trying to erase or produce a collective amnesia around what had happened. [...] By resigning, I found a way not only to leave the university but also to make this information public, to create a window in the wall so that the truth could circulate."[97]

Sara Ahmed's work provides a crucial lens for examining how institutions in higher education, navigate issues of inequality, violence, and oppression. Her insights reveal a systemic tendency within institutions to project an image of action, while often failing to address the root causes of these issues. Particularly, her perspective about 'happiness' as tool for oppression and 'complaint' as challenging institutional norms seem foundational for this research. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed states: "In describing happiness as a form of world making, I am indebted to the work of feminist, black, and queer scholars who have shown in different ways how happiness is used to justify oppression."[98]

Happiness, she argues, often serves as a facade, concealing underlying issues that persist within institutional structures. In her view, happiness is not just an emotion but an expectation—an "injunction," placed upon individuals to conform and overlook injustices. Ahmed describes this "duty to be happy" as a burden that requires individuals to prioritize the well-being and contentment of others, often at the expense of their own needs and desires.[99] Within institutions, this expectation pressures students and staff to conform to existing norms, implicitly discouraging them from voicing discomfort or dissatisfaction. Happiness, therefore, becomes a tool of compliance, hiding systemic issues by casting those who don't conform as responsible for their own misfortune.[100]

Moreover, in Ahmed's exploration of institutional reaction to complaints, she notes how complaints are often dismissed or labeled as "negative" because they require changes to existing arrangements. She points out the exhaustion and emotional strain that come from challenging institutional norms that do not recognize or make space for one's identity or existence. Within academic settings, this struggle is compounded by "creating complaint procedures" that give the illusion of action without truly addressing the issues at hand.[101] For Ahmed, those who voice complaints or expose problems are frequently framed as "the problem" themselves, and institutions assume that if the complainers leave, the issues will disappear with them. In her analysis, complaints offer a powerful lens into institutional power dynamics, revealing how difficult it is to challenge ingrained practices and make genuine, transformative change within higher education.[102]

Using Ahmed's lens to examine institutional dynamics reveals how discomfort, distress, and complaint can serve as powerful catalysts for change. Ahmed's

96 Florian Vörös, "Review of Living a Feminist Life, by Sara Ahmed," Monde des Idées. 2017.
97 "*Solidarités rabat-joies. Conversation avec Sara Ahmed*," trounoir, accessed November 16, 2024, https://www.trounoir.org/Solidarites-rabat-joies-Conversation-avec-Sara-Ahmed. Trad. Lucrezia Russo.
98 Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 2.
99 *Sara Ahmed: Dresher Conversations*, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zadqi8Pn0O0.
100 *ibid.*
101 *ibid.*
102 *ibid.*

insights suggest that rather than suppressing these expressions, valuing them could pave the way for meaningful transformation within educational spaces. It is essential, though, to recognize that complaints or expressions of dissatisfaction from students and faculty are not only seen as negative—as Ahmed suggests—but are often perceived as potentially dangerous by the institutions' leadership. Small, disruptive initiatives, such as Instagram accounts of school memes or accounts to collect anonymous complaints, are frequently "monitored" by institutions' leadership as a risk of escalating into larger protests or significant challenges to authority. This strikes me as a shortsighted approach. As an educator committed to fostering critical thinking, I find encouraging when students express opinions and engage in dialectical discussions, even when their methods diverge from traditional or expected approaches. Listening to these 'unofficial' voices is essential to understanding and contextualizing the challenges and discomfort that some students may experience. In my view, genuine listening should lead to open conversations, even if it means stepping beyond the institutional 'comfort zone.' As Ahmed underscores, setting up procedures or establishing 'official' diversity and inclusion committees (which are often co-opted by administration) is not addressing the problems of pain and distress of the community:

> "A lot of attention has been given to creating new complaints procedures as if the procedures themselves will mean we've addressed the problem", but "creating evidence of doing something is not the same as doing something"[103]

At PCA, I have experienced these dynamics firsthand when students—particularly those in the Communication Design department—openly questioned and critiqued institutional structures. I have even been questioned by leadership simply for "following" unofficial and disruptive Instagram accounts (accounts publishing memes, for instance), as if that act alone implied endorsement. In truth, I do endorse students taking a stand. But I clarified that 'following' these accounts is, to me, a way to 'listen' and understand the sources of their discomfort. How can issues be addressed if we're not willing to recognize where the pain lies? A core concern remains that students often feel compelled to remain anonymous, fearing possible repercussions. I look forward to a time when they can express their critiques openly and without apprehension.

Moreover, a few years ago, under my supervision, the Communication Design department offered an elective in Experimental Publishing. Three instructors co-taught the course and used it as a platform to gather and publish students' critical perspectives on the institution, teaching practices, and educational tools such as syllabi and assessments. The resulting fanzine, designed and risographed by students, remains a memorable experience for them—as some of my former students who attended that class very recently shared—a rare moment of unrestricted expression. Naturally, the leadership viewed this publication as a potential threat to institutional stability, which led to further questions (to me) from the administration. Even now, I struggle to see the problem.

Other educators echo this sentiment, acknowledging that complaints—or even strikes—can serve as valuable moments for reflection and recalibration, as underlined by Simon d'Hénin:

> "I generally find this friction to be healthy. I believe it's good for students to be in friction with the institution. That's my view. But sometimes I think that a good strike could help. In the sense that these are moments when people take the time to discuss, adjust their schedules, and get out of their routines. These are moments when things are redefined, when elements realign. If you wait for it to happen peacefully, it feels like it never will. Whereas a good strike, you shut down the school, you have a 15-day project, and things happen."[104]

Dissent and complaint, arising from discomfort or distress, are vital starting points for dismantling entrenched institutional power dynamics and fostering transformative change. Embracing these expressions as constructive rather than suppressing them, paves the way for an environment where the institution genuinely listens, learns, and evolves.

103 *ibid.*
104 Appendix, p. 75-78.

Preliminary Conclusion: Rethinking the Social Fabric

In this chapter, we have examined the complex interplay between market dynamics, institutional behaviors, and the distress experienced by members of educational communities, particularly students. Economic models, accreditation pressures, and market expectations increasingly influence institutional priorities, gradually steering schools away from their core mission of truly educating students. This shift has led students to feel discomfort, distress, and pain, as they perceive educational spaces as perpetuating the same social and economic pressures they encounter outside the educational institutions. Furthermore, students feel burdened by the need to conform to a 'market-ready' mold, which diminishes the transformative potential of their education. The rise in mental health issues and the growing demand for social justice among students reflect their desire to reimagine and reshape their schools to better address their needs.

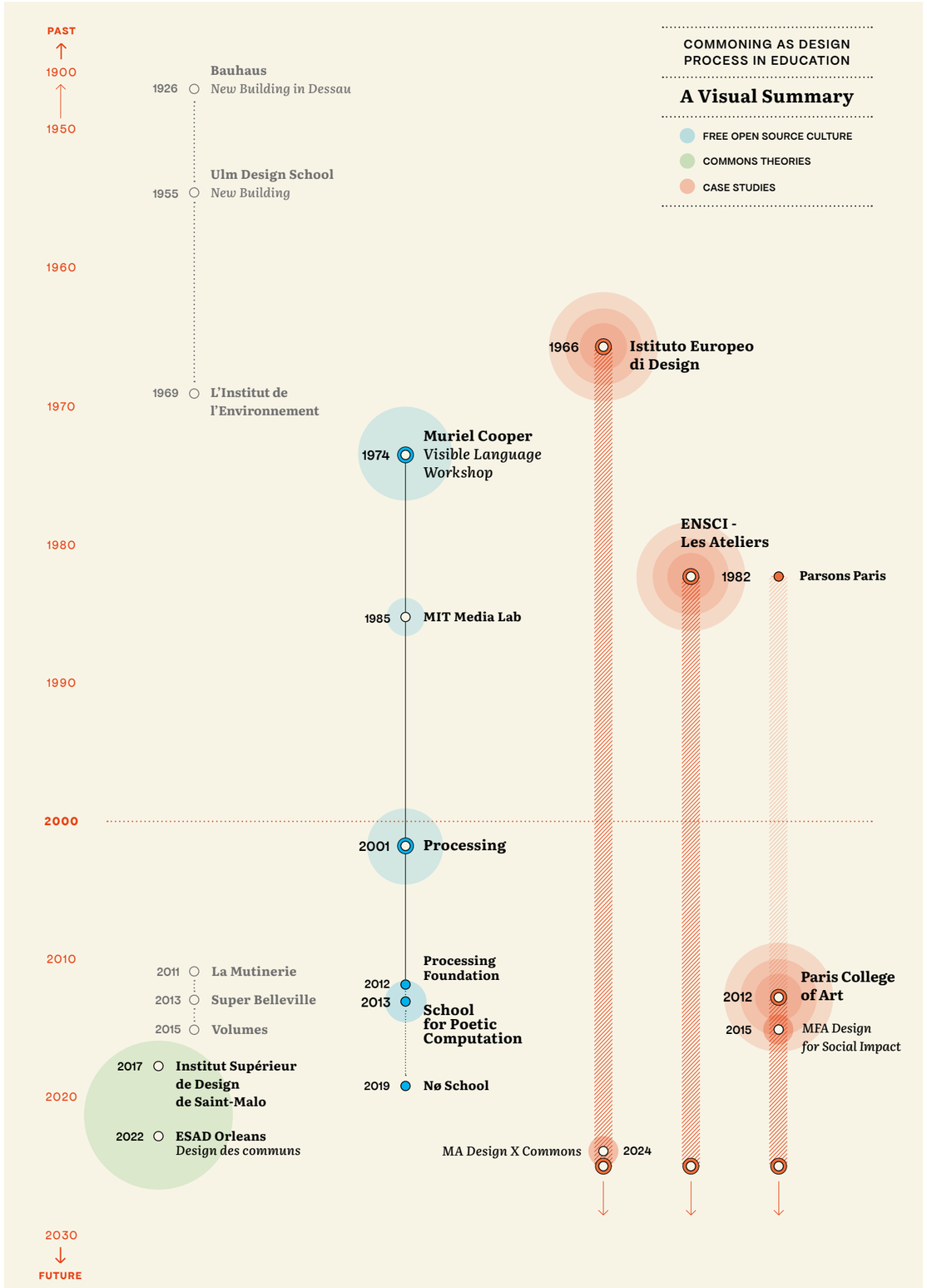
The critical juncture in art and design education is undeniably systemic, involving deeply interconnected layers within the educational ecosystem. Addressing this crisis calls for a holistic approach that goes beyond merely revising pedagogical strategies; it requires rethinking the foundational social fabric of institutions. Building resilient communities within schools is essential to shifting the educational paradigm, creating spaces that genuinely support students' growth and well-being.

Educators' role, therefore, may entail "resisting and transgressing," as bell hooks advocates, while also fostering an environment where students' distress and complaints are recognized as catalysts for change, drawing inspiration from Sara Ahmed's insights. Listening to students and reconnecting with the community are crucial steps toward rebuilding design education in a way that meets the needs of all stakeholders. This is not solely about rethinking student-centered pedagogy or reinforcing project-based learning; it is also about addressing the social dynamics that underpin the educational experience.

Teaching, as educators well know, is as much about guiding group dynamics as it is about imparting knowledge. The classroom is a space where educators balance transmitting content with understanding the individuals in the room, helping them engage with topics, and navigating interpersonal interactions.[105] Thus, the focus must extend beyond teaching methodologies to include the social dynamics that define the learning environment.

By viewing education through the lens of the commons in its social sense, we can explore how to rebuild education as a collaborative community. Such an approach involves students, faculty, institutions, and the broader ecosystem—including local landscapes, industries, and markets—while actively resisting the neoliberal and capitalist forces that dominate our society. These institutions might integrate alternative ways of working, emphasizing collaboration over hierarchy. We could envision institutions that develop horizontally, leveraging 'in-between' spaces, embracing the margins, and adopting methodologies inspired by the ethos of hacking or free open source culture. In the next chapter, we will apply De Angelis's social definition of commons to explore how design education in the 21st century might be reimagined, offering pathways for systemic transformation. •

105 In her work *Les pédagogies de l'apprentissage*, Marguerite Altet (PUF, 1997, p. 11) delineates two key dimensions of teaching practices. The first involves the management and structuring of knowledge by the educator and its subsequent appropriation by the learner—this falls within the domain of didactics. The second focuses on transforming information into knowledge through relational practices and classroom actions led by the teacher, including the organization of pedagogical situations for learners—this is the domain of pedagogy. This distinction underscores the dual role of educators: as facilitators of knowledge transmission and as active agents in shaping learning environments. In the context of rethinking design education, this perspective invites us to consider not only what is taught but how it is taught and experienced. By addressing both didactic and pedagogical approaches, we can work toward a more holistic and inclusive model of education that integrates relational dynamics with the intellectual engagement necessary to meet contemporary challenges.



[CHAPTER THREE]

Commoning as Design Process in Education

> I am convinced that the social practices of sharing and managing these resources, the Commoning, is a total design process, and this needs to be recognized within design education.[106]
>
> — ANGELA RUI, 2024

> The school is a design project that has been evolving over the last 40 years. When you manage a design project, particularly as a designer, you face difficulties. [...] The difficulty with the pedagogical program is also about how not to only make concessions.[107]
>
> — SIMON D'HÉNIN, 2024

On October 19, 2017, the MIT Press and the MIT Media Lab celebrated the 50th anniversary of Muriel Cooper's appointment as the first art director of the MIT Press. This event—marked by a symposium and the release of *Muriel Cooper* by David Reinfurt and Robert Wiesenberger—honored, above all, Cooper's legacy as an educator and pioneer of methodologies that emphasized hybridization, transdisciplinarity, and open knowledge sharing. These principles not only became core to free open source communities, but also are foundational to this research. In 1974, after two decades at MIT Press, Cooper founded the *Visual Language Workshop* (VLW), creating a space where teaching and research intersected. Drawing inspiration from the Bauhaus, she explored media, materials, and processes with her students, integrating emerging digital tools into her work. The VLW laid the groundwork for the MIT Media Lab, founded by Nicholas Negroponte in 1985, and became a capstone for its transdisciplinary ethos. While Muriel Cooper's influence is often celebrated for her integration of computers and new technologies into her research and practice,[108] it is equally important to highlight how her teaching fostered community-building through design research and practice. During the 2017 symposium, former students and collaborators of Muriel Cooper, including Tod Machover, Ron McNeil, Lisa Strausfeld, and David Small, shared reflections on their experiences under her mentorship. They spoke of the group's experimental spirit, the collaborative nature of their work, and how they never felt they were being "taught" in the traditional sense, but rather guided by Cooper as a mentor and facilitator.[109] Adding a personal dimension, her nephew Jonathan recounted her philosophy: "When I applied to art schools and was obsessing about which one to attend, Muriel calmly told me to relax. 'The school is unimportant,' she said, 'It's who you go to school with.'"[110]

This insight highlights Cooper's belief that the community is as critical as the tools, emphasizing collaboration and collective growth over institutional prestige.

As established in the previous chapter, the social fabric (the community) lies at the core of higher education in art and design schools, highlighting the critical role of collective dynamics within these institutions. Drawing from the pioneering contributions of Muriel Cooper—whose work has profoundly influenced the free open source culture—and reimagining the educational ecosystem through the lens of the commons,

106 Appendix, p. 81–84.
107 *ibid.*, p. 75–78.
108 Cooper's groundbreaking project Information Landscapes, presented at the 1994 TED5 Conference shortly before her passing, has been developed at the VLW.
109 *Muriel, a Symposium. 10.19.2017*, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYRmzA5vTJA.
110 *ibid.*

this chapter centers on the vital thread of community-building. Using this perspective, we delve into the tensions and opportunities in design education by examining three central pillars: the role of pooled resources, the importance of fostering community, and the transformative potential of commoning as a participatory and collaborative process. Together, these elements provide a framework for addressing systemic challenges and envisioning a more equitable and sustainable future for art and design education.

To ground this analysis, we juxtapose current institutional practices with examples of educational initiatives from the free open source culture emerging outside traditional academic frameworks. By presenting them as counterpoints, we aim to identify strategies that could inspire transformative change within design schools, forging a more inclusive and collaborative educational paradigm.

3.1 Pooled Resources: Space and Tools

The urgency of addressing resource depletion in the Anthropocene has increasingly permeated design practice, prompting critical reflections on the use of the common good. This interrogation extends to tangible resources, as exemplified by Studio Novotypo in the Netherlands, with its project *Offgrid* that explores the self-production of ink and paper to create a self-sustaining graphic design studio, or by Marietta Eugster with their experimentations in reusing sheets of waste printed paper to printing catalogues for their clients. It also raises questions about the environmental impact of digital tools: the French collective *Designers Éthiques*, echoed by the work of *Studio Practicable*, actively works to raise awareness about the energy consumption tied to creating and maintaining digital products and interfaces. In contemporary design practice, however, the question often shifts from how (and how much) resources are used to whether production itself is still necessary. Initiatives like the *Art and Design Research Symposium Ad Rec* in France have embraced this discourse, framing their open call for the 2025 conference around the theme *Faire, encore* (To make, again), challenging the principles and objectives of producing objects in an already saturated world and calling for a deeper examination of the purpose and responsibility behind such practices.[111]

In design education, the concept of common good—or pooled resources—takes on another unique dimension. When emphasizing collective work and community-building, the focus shifts from tangible materials for production to the social resources that underpin the studio environment. According to scholar Michael Tovey, the studio practice is one of the foundational pillars of art and design education, alongside the tutorial, the library, and the critique.[112] Within this framework, the studio serves as both a physical and conceptual space for production and knowledge sharing: shared spaces—rooms, studios and workshops—and tools—both analog and digital—can, thus, be identified as its essential resources. In the following section, we will examine how space and tools are not merely functional but serve as the backbone of the social fabric that sustains and nurtures the art and design school community, and how reconsidering these resources can foster stronger community-building dynamics.

3.1.1 The Building Utopia

"The ultimate goal of all art is the building!"[113] This is how Walter Gropius opens the Bauhaus Manifesto—published in April 1919 as a declaration of the foundational principles for his new school—by positioning architecture—thus the building—not only as a unifying discipline but also as the ultimate aim of artistic endeavors.

> "Let us strive for, conceive and create the new building of the future that will unite every discipline, architecture and sculpture and painting, and which will one day rise heavenwards from the million hands of craftsmen as a clear symbol of a new belief to come."[114]

Since then, Gropius's 'building utopia' has significantly influenced the trajectory of art and design schools across Europe and the U.S., yet it has also carried the paradox of misalignment between the school's spatial organization, and its pedagogical objectives. When Gropius finally had the opportunity to design and construct the Bauhaus building in Dessau in 1926, the structure—imagined as a "cathedral"—fell short of embodying

111 "*Faire, Encore* – Sciencesconf.Org," accessed December 4, 2024, https://ad-rec2025.sciencesconf.org/.
112 Michael Tovey, "Developments in Design Pedagogy," in DS82: Proceedings of the 17th International Conference on Engineering and Product Design Education (E&PDE15) (Great Expectations: Design Teaching, Research & Enterprise, The Design Society, 2015), 188–93.
113 "Manifesto of the Staatliches Bauhaus," accessed November 23, 2024, https://bauhausmanifesto.com/.
114 "Manifesto of the Staatliches Bauhaus."

the school's pedagogical ambitions.[115] While Gropius envisioned collective workshops fostering experimental teaching of the arts, the reality was that famous foundation courses, for instance, ended up taking place in traditional, enclosed classrooms, far removed from the "honorific collective workshops"[116] initially imagined. The ambition of the manifesto proved difficult to translate into pragmatic teaching methods, with the Bauhaus pedagogy innovating more in its approach to shaping artists than in offering a clearly defined, concrete spatial framework.[117]

When architect and designer Max Bill—a Bauhaus graduate—was appointed as the first director of the Ulm School of Design in 1953, he not only redefined its program but also resisted the idea of housing the school in pre-existing buildings, perpetuating Gropius utopian ambition of architecture serving not only as a practical tool for teaching but also as a powerful symbol of the school's pedagogical ethos. After two years in temporary locations, the school finally moved, in 1955, to its new building, designed by Bill, and inspired by Gropius's complex orthogonal plans.[118] In France, experimental pedagogical initiatives inspired by the Ulm School of Design—and, by extension, the Bauhaus—such as *L'Institut de l'Environnement* (1969–1971), sought to integrate pedagogical objectives with spatial design. The school aimed to merge human sciences and architecture, extending its ambition to décloisonner disciplines through an open architectural arrangement that encouraged interaction among students from diverse fields. Despite its innovative vision, the project faced numerous challenges, including organizational difficulties and limited interdisciplinary collaboration, which ultimately led to its closure after only two years of operation. During its brief existence, the anticipated integration and exchange among students of different disciplines failed to materialize as intended, highlighting the complexities of translating spatial and pedagogical ideals into practice.[119]

Merging pedagogical ethos with spatial design remains a key ambition for design schools, particularly where studio work is central to students' activities, and the need for dedicated spaces to 'build' takes precedence. The Parisian *École Nationale de Création Industrielle*, known as ENSCI – Les Ateliers (The Workshops), exemplifies this approach, also in its name. Its ground floor is designed around a central courtyard, surrounded by workshops that allow students to learn and practice with various materials, reinforcing the connection between education and hands-on craftsmanship. This organizational structure was a deliberate pedagogical choice when the school was founded in 1982. While the course offerings have evolved over time, the centrality of workshops has remained unchanged. As illustrated in promotional videos from the early 1980s, workshops have always played a pivotal role in transforming ideas into tangible prototypes, enabling students to test and refine their projects.[120] The primary objective has consistently been to create and build—an ethos that continues to shape the school's educational philosophy today. Anne-Marie Boutin—president of ENSCI from 1984 to 1992—captured this ambition for the space in the early 1980s:

> "A place conducive to creation, a building where people want to work, equipped with essential resources, open to the outside world—day and night, weekdays and weekends—a space for encounters and exchanges with all partners involved in industrial creation."[121]

IED Milan is in the process of developing a new campus of 30.000 m2 within the area ex-Macello—a revitalized former industrial area—of Milan, to centralize the students of five different locations of the city,[122] finally aligning with its Chief Operating Officer's long-standing vision:

> "[...] The campus project is so crucial, as it will allow us to make a qualitative leap both in terms of size and available space. [...] Currently, we mainly have classrooms with a few labs; in the new campus, the labs and workshops will be central, with classrooms, both for theoretical and practical lessons, serving as support. [Moreover,] labs are no longer conceived as course-specific labs, as they were in the past. Up until now, we talked about the 'graphic design lab' or the 'design lab,' associating the lab with a specific course or area. [...] But the concept has changed. In the new campus, labs will be organized by type of work, not by courses. Ideally, all students will have access to all types of work. [...] The underlying idea is that the lab will be at the heart of the teaching.

115 Steven Henry Madoff, *Art School | The MIT Press* (MIT Press, 2009), https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/art-school, 69.
116 *ibid.*
117 *ibid.*
118 *ibid.*, 93.
119 Tony Côme and Jean-Louis Violeau, *L'Institut de l'environnement : une école décloisonnée: Urbanisme, architecture, design, communication*, Illustrated édition (Paris: B42, 2017).
120 ENSCI Video Archives.
121 *ibid.*
122 Alessandro Bergonzi, "*Ied: nuovo campus a Milano (nell'ex macello), 100 milioni per nuove sedi e formazione*," Corriere della Sera, October 5, 2022, https://www.corriere.it/economia/aziende/22_ottobre_05/ied-nuovo-campus-milano-nell-ex-macello-100-milioni-nuove-sedi-formazione-52c544e4-4409-11ed-a0de-10925927a2b2.shtml.

> The campus project is essential for this very reason: it allows us to reorganize the school and make it function more effectively with a multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspective."[123]

The ambition to re-center pedagogy around 'making'—a concept rooted in IED's original motto, *La scuola del fare* (the school of 'making') since its founding in 1966—and to design spaces with this perspective is evident in Soldini's statement. However, this shift presents a dual-edged challenge. Consolidating IED Milan's entire community under one roof inherently requires stabilizing student numbers, which could conflict with the institution's growth-oriented economic model. This highlights another consideration is the economic impact of 'new buildings' on art and design schools: beyond their functional purpose, buildings often symbolize the institution's status and identity. In an increasingly competitive landscape, facilities frequently become 'selling points' to attract students and their families. Yet, in a world facing the acceleration of resource depletion, this raises critical questions: shouldn't the narrative of design schools shift to prioritize environmental considerations and the respectful use of shared resources instead of celebrating the prestige of high-tech facilities? In a contemporary context where resources must be respected and conserved, the 'prestigious building model' may well be outdated. Moreover, in a perpetually growth-oriented system, a new building risks becoming quickly saturated, failing to sustain the community well-being it aims to support.

If the challenge lies in striking a balance between the scale of the building and the number of students it serves, ENSCI offers an interesting case. The number of new students admitted each year remains constant—as the public school is not driven by an economic model reliant on tuition fees—yet space constraints continue to pose significant challenges, as Simon d'Hénin highlights:

> "[...] when the school was founded in 1982, we designed objects, furniture, etc. Learning wood, metal, plastic, polymers, models, etc., was essential. Today, we work a lot on virtual reality, augmented reality, etc. Do we create a new studio for that? We made the Media platform, but that raises questions: what space, how to animate it, how to integrate it with the rest? [...] Today, the school is saturated. Something happens every day. In terms of space and time, there is no room to add new things, even though there is a demand to continue developing new dimensions in the school. [...] We're growing, but growth, like that of a coral reef, doesn't happen in a fixed volume; you expand by colonizing the surrounding areas."[124]

This reflection suggests that the issue of space is not solely tied to financial pressures but also reflects how institutions evolve their pedagogical offer and adapt to the contemporary demands of the design field. The paradox of the 'building utopia' seems, thus, yet unsolvable.

3.1.2 Nomad, Shared, Hybrid Spaces

In this context, is a physical space truly necessary to foster a sense of community within an educational institution? Do we need to centralize all members in a single location to achieve cohesion, collaboration, and the effective transmission and preservation of knowledge? Free open source projects, which often operate without fixed physical spaces, challenge this assumption. They illustrate that communities can thrive and collaborate effectively through decentralized, digital, or hybrid models, offering alternative perspectives to the traditional reliance on physical infrastructure. However, the challenges experienced during the COVID-19 crisis, particularly the difficulties faced by students and faculty in adapting to online courses, suggest that physical spaces remain crucial for cultivating an efficient learning environment, especially in art and design education where studio work is central.[125] These spaces help to build a social fabric that supports community dynamics—after all, even online communities often convene in real-life events such as conventions and fairs to solidify their connections.

NØ SCHOOL, founded in 2018 by artists and educators Benjamin Gaulon and Dasha Ilina, exemplifies an unconventional educational initiative rooted in free open source culture and shows an approach to space that is inspirational. Operating as a summer school in Nevers, Burgundy, NØ SCHOOL challenges traditional educational models by fostering a community that critically examines the social and environmental impacts of technology. This approach promotes a flexible, inclusive,

123 Appendix, p. 84–86.
124 *ibid.*, p. 75–78.
125 Kevin Carey, "Everybody Ready for the Big Migration to Online College? Actually, No," The New York Times, March 13, 2020, sec. The Upshot, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/13/upshot/coronavirus-online-college-classes-unprepared.html.

and collaborative atmosphere, encouraging participants to engage deeply with local contexts and global technological issues.[126] While the school has a strong connection to its location—its original name is NØ SCHOOL NEVERS after the town where the summer school is held—it also demonstrates how the essence of a community can transcend its physical setting. As Ben Gaulon, one of its founders, explains, the soul of the school and its community lies not in the location itself but in the shared ethos and collaborative spirit.

> "[...] Our first space was a ceramic factory, which we unfortunately lost. Now, we're in this gallery, called the USANII space, and it's our third year here. But we're not sure how long we'll be able to stay because the owner noticed that things were going well and decided to raise the rent significantly. That said, for me, NØ SCHOOL isn't just about a location; it's more of an idea, a community. It's not the end of the world to move. [...] What's important for me is that participants feel taken care of. [...] To me, that's what it means to build a community: organizing the conditions, the space, the music, the atmosphere, while being very attentive to every detail. And that's where it works well."[127]

This school presents an interesting duality: it is deeply anchored in its location, fostering collaborations with local actors such as hotels and student housing providers to ensure accommodations; at the same time, it embraces a nomadic flexibility, with its community relocating depending on the events' locations (like Paris, Nantes, or the Netherlands). Each new setting establishes meaningful connections with the realities of the local context.

The nomadic approach to the transmission of knowledge offers a compelling solution to address the lack of space or the constraints that fixed locations can impose. This model, increasingly appearing in cultural or educational institutions, exemplifies how mobility can both diversify perspectives and democratize access to education and culture. Initiatives such as *Centre Pompidou Hors les Murs* in France[128], or the Visiting School of the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London,[129] illustrate how shifting locations can anchor learning experiences in different territories, enriching teaching methodologies and learning environments. At the same time, this approach can foster cultural accessibility, bringing art, design, and education to regions where access to museums, galleries, or schools is limited.

Similarly, over the past decade, alternative models of knowledge transmission centered around nomadic and hybrid spaces have gained traction, emphasizing open accessibility and community building. Early Parisian coworking spaces pioneers such as *Mutinerie* (founded in 2011) and *Super Belleville* (2013)—emerged long before Silicon Valley-inspired commercial entities like WeWork or Wojo, which replicate the aesthetics and ethos of Google-style headquarters—offered more than shared work environments. They became hybrid spaces, fostering interdisciplinary collaborations while hosting workshops, round tables, and conferences to facilitate knowledge exchange. *La Mutinerie* took this vision even further in 2014 with the creation of *Mutinerie Village*, a coworking space in the Eure-et-Loir countryside. In an interview with Usbek et Rica, Mutinerie founder Antoine Van Den Broek described his philosophy of rethinking modes of work and living, highlighting the rise of "new artisans" like freelance designers who reclaim collaborative production as methods of empowerment.[130] *Mutinerie Village* continues to provide a rural alternative to urban workspaces, offering residences where participants can engage with a permaculture garden, a traditional percheron farmhouse, and a fully operational farm with animals.[131]

This ethos of blending workspaces with broader dimensions of life—merging residency, makerspace, foodlab, and connections to ecosystems—has evolved further with initiatives like *Volumes*—co-founded by Francesco Cingolani, also founder of *Super Belleville*— recognized as one of the first tiers-lieu in Paris to emphasize social and environmental responsibility, and acting as a bridge between its community and the urban. Nevertheless, co-working spaces and tiers-lieu often carry an entrepreneurial ethos that, at times, seems misaligned with the values of free open source movements, which critique the capitalist economic system and prioritize non-proprietary collaboration and open knowledge.[132] In contrast, more radical approaches are embraced by collectives dedicated to artistic production. These collectives act as catalysts for knowledge exchange, offering hybrid spaces that

126 "*NØ School : Apprendre à s'émanciper Du Capitalisme*," Makery, accessed August 29, 2024, https://www.makery.info/en/2024/03/21/no-school-apprendre-a-semanciper-du-capitalisme/.
127 Appendix, p. 65–69.
128 "*Expositions hors-les-murs*," accessed November 24, 2024, https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/programme/expositions-hors-les-murs.
129 "Visiting School," accessed November 24, 2024, https://www.aaschool.ac.uk/academicprogrammes/visitingschool.
130 Usbek & Rica, "*Mutinerie, coworking, travail collaboratif | Demain la Ville - Vidéo*," Demain La Ville - Bouygues Immobilier, February 18, 2014, https://www.demainlaville.com/antoine-van-den-broek-co-fondateur-de-mutinerie-espace-de-coworking/.
131 "*Mutinerie Village*," accessed December 6, 2024, https://sites.google.com/view/la-residence-verte/accueil.
132 Benjamin Lorre, "*État de l'art sur les Tiers Lieux*," *Terminal. Technologie de l'information, culture & société*, no. 123 (December 31, 2018), https://doi.org/10.4000/terminal.3365.

serve both as hubs for creative work and as platforms for sharing expertise and fostering collaboration. *Paris Print Club*, located in 18th arrondissement of Paris, is described as "a space for artisanal and artistic creation dedicated to imagery and the publishing of printed objects, bringing together workshops for engravers, screen printers, typographers, publishers, designers, graphic artists, photographers, and artists."[133] Residents often organize workshops to share their expertise, fostering an ethos of democratizing artistic practice.

Similarly, DOC!, situated in the 19th arrondissement, "provides spaces for the creation and dissemination of contemporary art, bringing together artists, photographers, musicians, writers, designers, and more, fostering a vibrant community of creatives united by shared values."[134] Originally established as a squatted space in an abandoned high school, with the dual purpose of providing housing for marginalized communities and serving as a site for artistic production, DOC! has since undergone a process of normalization and "pacification" through institutionalization—formalized by an agreement with the local city council—and functions today as a cultural hub offering private and shared studios, temporary residencies, and nine specialized workshops—including woodworking, metalwork, screen printing, and sound production—accessible to both residents and external collaborators, and organizes exhibitions, concerts, theater performances, audiovisual media, and free workshops or seminars.[135]

These spaces exemplify a hybrid model where professional practice and pedagogical aims intersect, fostering environments that support both artistic production and the cultivation of community through knowledge transmission. They demonstrate not only the possibility of permeability between practice and teaching but showcase how professional studios could function as complementary spaces for education outside institutional walls, offering alternative frameworks for sharing expertise.

3.1.2 Community-Building Through Tool Making

In contemporary design practice, tools are far more than functional instruments; they are deeply intertwined with the frameworks and ideologies of the tech monopolies that dominate the industry. Graphic design offers a particularly striking example of how design practices operate within infrastructures shaped by Silicon Valley giants such as Apple, Adobe, and Google. Their ready-made tools have not only streamlined workflows but also constrained the profession, steering it toward standardized and flattened aesthetics. While these tools promote "intuitive" design processes, they have commodified the practice, emphasizing alignment with market standards over affordability and inclusivity. This dominance of tech monopolies in tool production and distribution has shifted graphic design toward being perceived as merely a compilation of technical skills, often devoid of critical engagement or originality.[136]

In this context, design schools must confront a crucial question: how can they prepare students to navigate and resist these monopolistic dynamics? This challenge takes on particular relevance in the educational sphere, where fostering critical awareness and creative autonomy is paramount. If pooled resources in the form of shared spaces underpin the social fabric of design schools, the tools students use are equally critical. Reclaiming tools from the dominance of tech monopolies and redefining their role within the educational process is not only a foundation for challenging the capitalist dynamics driving us toward ecological collapse, but also an opportunity to build and use tools more responsibly, incorporating principles of frugality in their design and production. This approach encourages a critical reassessment of the tools we rely on and fosters a more sustainable, ethical, and mindful design practice.

One of the most significant influences on rethinking tools for creation—and a pillar of this investigation—is Processing. Initially released in 2001 as a programming language and environment, Processing quickly evolved into a more complex and inspiring project. It expanded beyond its technical foundations to incorporate educational and inclusive considerations, ultimately transforming into a community-building platform that fosters collaboration and accessibility in creative practices. As Casey Reas, one of the creators of Processing, shared:

> "It's hard to pin down what Processing is, precisely. I admit, it can be confusing, but here it is: it's both a programming environment and a programming language, but it's also an approach to building a software tool that incorporates its community into the definition. It's more accurate to call Processing a platform—a platform for experimentation, thinking, and learning. It's a foundation and beginning more than a conclusion."[137]

133 "PARIS PRINT CLUB," PARIS PRINT CLUB (blog), accessed December 6, 2024, https://www.parisprintclub.com/.
134 "*DOC! – Espace de production artistique rue du Docteur Potain à Paris.*," DOC!, accessed December 6, 2024, https://doc.work/.
135 "*DOC! – Espace de production artistique rue du Docteur Potain à Paris.*"
136 The subject has been extensively discussed in my thesis *From Processing to Design: Free Open Source Culture and the Redefinition of Contemporary Design Practice.*

137 Casey Reas, "Thoughts on Software for the Visual Arts," Medium, January 27, 2019, https://medium.com/@REAS/thoughts-on-software-for-the-visual-arts-690ea7bfc8b6.
138 Casey Reas and Ben Fry, the creators of Processing, were students of John Maeda at the MIT Media Lab. Maeda himself succeeded Muriel Cooper at the Media Lab, continuing her legacy of integrating design, technology, and education.
139 *2017 CAST Symposium BEING MATERIAL: Ben Fry and Casey Reas*, PROGRAMMABLE, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BtqBjGEpAO.
140 *ibid.*
141 *ibid.*
142 Casey Reas, "Thoughts on Software for the Visual Arts."
143 "Processing Foundation," accessed December 6, 2024, https://processingfoundation.org/.
144 In 2014, they initiated the free software Visual Culture that allows keeping track, visualizing, and sharing the visual history of in-progress files without losing the current version of the work. Inspired by the Git branching model used in open source software development they expanded its collaborative methodology to visual practices as graphic design. Visual Culture became thus an invitation for collaborations between professionals.
145 "*Visual Culture Open Source Publishing, Git et Le Design Graphique*," trans. Lucrezia Russo.
146 "Large-Scale Collaboration in Graphic Design Communities of Practice – Our Collaborative Tools," accessed December 5, 2024, https://ourcollaborative.tools.
147 PPP is a French collective dedicated to experimental editorial projects created with Free Libre Open Source Software (FLOSS), leveraging web technologies like HTML and CSS for layout design, and advocating for autonomy from traditional software while promoting knowledge-sharing through workshops, lectures, and collaborative initiatives.

Conceived at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) by Casey Reas and Ben Fry and building on the legacy of figures like Muriel Cooper and John Maeda,[138] this accessible coding language and programming environment was designed as an educational tool to teach graphic design principles, such as color and composition, through computation.[139] Aimed at artists and designers, Processing encouraged "learning to create software" rather than "learning to use software," offering a practical response to the methodological crisis in design at the end of the 1990s.[140] From the onset, Processing was quickly adopted by professionals who embraced its potential as a modular, expandable, and customizable kit.[141] Its auto-productive methodology echoed Do It Yourself (DIY) and hackers' approaches and it opened the path to a renewal of the crafts in the design practice, resulting in a hybridization of analog and digital methods of productions. Nevertheless, the core idea of Processing is even more radical, and its moral extent that "emerged within the culture of free software" defines its approach and "differentiates [it] from proprietary, consumer-driven software."[142] Processing stands alongside the free/libre and open source software ideology and promotes the ideas of freedom and accessibility as essential. Over the years, Processing evolved, thus, from a tool into a community-building platform. The establishment of the Processing Foundation in 2012 marked a pivotal moment in positioning education at the heart of the project. Its mission goes beyond instruction, aiming to cultivate a community of learners who actively participate in the development of both the software and the broader platform.[143]

Since its release, Processing has inspired a growing design community exploring alternative methods of creation rooted in open source principles. In Europe, Open Source Publishing (OSP), founded in Brussels in 2006, stands as a pioneer in this movement. Among the first graphic design collectives to exclusively use Free Libre Open Source Software (FLOSS) for production and free open licenses for publication, OSP pushed back against the constraints of proprietary software like Adobe, which often impose standardized design practices. Beyond reimagining digital tools[144] and studio models, OSP also questioned the role of educational institutions in shaping tool usage within design education. By challenging the economic dependence on mainstream software, OSP calls on both designers and schools to dismantle these paradigms:

> "How can we dismantle the dominant logic [of closed software] if we don't address it at its foundation? In this closed environment where students are trained for their own alienation, schools have a crucial role to play in ensuring that the world to come is not the one promised by the software industry. We dream of schools that allocate their software budgets [...] to free software, [...] teacher training, and [...] workshop materials. Schools that would create and redistribute free software, potentially making it—why not?—a means of communication. How many failures and setbacks will it take before we finally open our eyes?"[145]

3.1.3 Tools for Teaching and Learning

Building on the legacy of Processing and OSP, Julie Blanc's recent article, "Large-scale Collaboration in Graphic Design Communities of Practice," underscores the vital role of community-building in graphic design through the use of open tools. She highlights how shared experiences and collaborative projects not only strengthen professional networks but also serve as a catalyst for fostering innovative and inclusive creative practices.[146] French graphic designer, developer, and member of the collective PrePostPrint (PPP),[147] Julie Blanc argues that integrating free open source principles into design education empowers students to question proprietary software's dominance while embracing ethical and community-driven approaches. According to Blanc, schools have a responsibility to act as spaces for experimentation, encouraging teamwork and innovation by introducing alternative tools and methods that align with free open source values. This, she suggests, bridges the gap between technological empowerment

and social impact, fostering a more inclusive and responsible design practice.[148]

In recent years, the focus on reevaluating the use of digital tools within the framework of higher education has gained significant momentum. A notable example of this shift is the symposium *Open Open: Projets numériques collaboratifs, libres et open source, dans les écoles d'art en France et en Belgique* (Open Open: Collaborative, Free, and Open Source Digital Projects in Art Schools in France and Belgium), held at the *École Supérieure d'Art et de Communication* in Cambrai in May 2023. This event highlights how French art schools are increasingly exploring these transformations as viable opportunities for change.[149] During the event, a series of conferences, workshops, and exhibitions showcased the diverse approaches to open projects, demonstrating their potential as transformative tools for design education. These initiatives highlighted how tools can go beyond being mere technical supports to becoming integral extensions of a project's scope. They also underscored their role as methodological assets, fostering collaboration and interaction among students and practitioners, ultimately reshaping perspectives on how tools can be considered and implemented in learning environments.

If these examples originate in the digital realm and align with the ethos of the digital commons, the principles of free open source and knowledge sharing extend far beyond digital tools. Sylvia Fredriksson—a designer, researcher, and educator whose expertise and practice center on digital cultures, data literacy, information design, civic representations, and commons, and whose research explores the intersections of design, technology, and politics[150]—illustrates this broader application. At *École Supérieure d'Art et Design* (ESAD) in Orléans, she was invited to design a program titled *Design des Communs* (Design of the Commons). This initiative reflects the school's commitment to fostering teaching approaches that are open, horizontal, and deliberately non-hierarchical, further embedding the ethos of the commons into its educational practices:

> "In these programs, we have implemented an open source approach: every production is shared so that others can take it up, and the intellectual property of what is produced belongs to the collective. This truly shifts the students' perspective, moving them from an individual diploma-focused mindset to a collaborative logic. […][151]

The approach to tools and means of production reflects this ethos by integrating non-hierarchical, community-building methodologies into the learning experience. It embraces the idea that instructors and students can learn together, fostering student autonomy and creating an environment that moves away from traditional, top-down teaching methods:

> "When we received our first ceramic 3D printing machines, there was very little documentation available. We had to learn together, both professors and students, embracing failures, creating our own documentation, and modifying the machines. This process not only enabled technical empowerment but also enhanced the autonomy of our students. Some have now become far more skilled than us […]. This collective learning process and the logic of peer-to-peer education among students have created a very positive dynamic. For instance, at the start of the academic year, we dedicate the entire month of September to collective research in the workshop, where students teach and train one another. This approach allows us to go beyond our own limitations as educators and serves as a powerful way to empower students and engage them in a collaborative mindset."[152]

Tools and their limitations become an opportunity not only for technical and critical advancement but also for fostering synergies among users—students, instructors, and staff—through the making and sharing of common resources.

3.2 Community and Commoning Intertwined

Space and tools, understood as pooled resources, play a crucial role in fostering the communities that use them. This interdependence reflects the core principle of commoning, where the act of sharing and maintaining resources becomes inseparable from the process of community-building itself. As illustrated in previous chapters, commoning is not just about managing shared

148 "Large-Scale Collaboration in Graphic Design Communities of Practice - Our Collaborative Tools."
149 communication59, "OPEN OPEN — *Journée d'études*," April 23, 2023, https://www.esa-n.info/post/open-open-journée-d-études.
150 "(about) | Sylvia Fredriksson," accessed December 6, 2024, https://www.sylviafredriksson.net/about/.
151 Appendix, p. 69-73.
152 *ibid.*

assets but also about cultivating the social fabric that sustains them: for instance, this cyclical relationship mirrors the functioning of digital commons like Wikipedia, where the community both creates and sustains the shared resource while simultaneously strengthening its own collective identity. In this sense, the goal extends beyond the maintenance of the resource; it encompasses the continuous creation and reinforcement of the community itself through acts of collaboration and shared responsibility. Moreover, building a community goes beyond simply gathering individuals in a physical or virtual space. As demonstrated through the sociological lens of commons theories, community building and sustainability are rooted in more complex dynamics that involve both interconnections among community members and a meaningful relationship with the surrounding ecosystem.

Higher education institutions, shaped by systemic forces within broader economic, cultural, and societal landscapes, face the dual challenge of cultivating resilient internal communities while establishing productive links to their surrounding contexts—whether local territories, markets, or sociopolitical influences. Achieving this requires institutions to navigate their own permeability, managing boundaries and fostering connections with external partners.

This balancing act, however, is often complicated by spatial limitations and mobility challenges that hinder the seamless integration of internal and external dynamics. Within this context, design education serves as a platform where inclusivity and permeability are constantly negotiated. Institutions strive to create close-knit educational environments that also remain open to external collaboration and influence.

In examining three schools central to this ethnographic research—Paris College of Art (PCA), Istituto Europeo di Design (IED), and ENSCI – Les Ateliers—we observe distinct approaches to building and sustaining their communities. These institutions differ in identity (two private, one public), academic frameworks and accreditation systems (American, Italian, French), and geographic contexts (Italy, Spain, and Brazil for IED; France for PCA and ENSCI). Together, they reflect a variety of interactions with their ecosystems, offering insights into how art and design schools respond to the challenges of cultivating resilient, inclusive communities. These schools, which have shaped my own education and career, exemplify diverse models of strategies that institutions employ to bridge internal dynamics with the external world. By implementing various systems that support their pedagogy and nurture their communities through transdisciplinarity and collaboration, they provide a rich foundation for this research, highlighting practices that are foundational to the act of commoning.

3.2.1 Community and Pedagogy Preservation: ENSCI – Les Atelier

When examining how institutions configure themselves geographically and manage their connections with their surrounding territories, it becomes clear that their pedagogical approach shapes the degree of permeability they maintain with their external environment. This configuration not only influences how they engage with local ecosystems but also affects the dynamics and interactions among actors within the school itself.

If we observe ENSCI, it seems to operate as a closed community, a characteristic acknowledged by both its students and leadership. Some students I interviewed described their experience as feeling like being part of a "sect," reflecting a sense of exclusivity and intense internal culture. Similarly, members of the school's leadership admitted to embracing this notion, stating that "we must acknowledge the word 'closed' when talking about the reality of ENSCI." This dual recognition reflects a complex institutional identity—one that fosters an immersive, close-knit learning environment while struggling with the tensions of being perceived as isolated and exclusive. This exclusivity is partly linked to the school's enduring reputation as one of the top French design schools, reinforcing its selective and inward-looking culture. However, it also stems from its strong pedagogical ethos, which limits the school's permeability to external collaborations that might compromise its educational framework. The challenge is balancing openness with preserving the school's unique educational values:

> "If one day, for example, we go for MOOCs[153], does it make sense to move towards teaching where there is no one in front of you anymore? Or to pool resources with other schools, allowing our students to train

153 Acronym for Massive Open Online Course.

elsewhere? Why not? [...] But how do we ensure that the pedagogy will align with our values? How do we make sure that when they return, they aren't out of step?"[154]

Moreover, Simon d'Hénin reflects on the evolving nature of ENSCI's permeability, comparing its past openness to its current state of saturation:

"Today, we are in a different situation than 40 years ago, when we thought people could come to school like entering a train station. People came in, left, stayed for 2 hours or 10 years, depending on the subjects and expertise needed. Today, the school is saturated."[155]

The original flexibility allowed for an organic flow of knowledge and collaboration. However, today, the school has reached a state of near-constant activity, where space and time are fully occupied, leaving little room for additional programs or initiatives, despite an ongoing demand for expansion and innovation.[156]

This changing dynamic also raises questions about how ENSCI interacts with external partners, particularly regarding apprenticeships.[157] D'Hénin highlights the complexities of delegating part of the students' education to external professionals in studios and companies. While such collaborations can enrich the learning experience by offering real-world expertise, they also pose significant challenges. The school must oversee these partnerships closely to ensure the quality of training and alignment with its educational objectives. However, this monitoring process can be difficult, as the external partners operate within their established professional cultures, often resistant to adapting their methods to fit the school's pedagogical framework.[158] This tension underscores a deeper challenge in balancing internal educational integrity with meaningful external engagement.

While the ethos of collaboration with the industry remains central—anchored in close partnerships with industrial actors as originally envisioned when the school was founded—challenges emerge when pedagogical development surpasses the institution's internal resources. In such cases, relying solely on industry and market partnerships proves insufficient to meet these evolving needs. Over time, ENSCI's configuration evolved into what could be described as a "saturated bubble," where internal dynamics increasingly dominate, making external collaborations more complex. While its founding mission focused on preparing students for professional integration through industry partnerships, the institution now faces the challenge of balancing this external orientation with its insular culture. Nevertheless, this inward focus has also enabled a unique form of transdisciplinarity within the "bubble." It fosters a process of preserving the school's community and pedagogical integrity, creating a protected space for cultivating critical thinking and experimental learning that might be harder to sustain in a more permeable environment.

3.2.2 Community and Transdisciplinary Approach: Istituto Europeo di Design

By contrast, the Istituto Europeo di Design (IED) presents a decentralized, network-based institutional model with 11 campuses in Italy, 3 in Spain, and 2 in Brazil. This geographically dispersed structure suggests an inherent potential for inter-campus exchanges and a permeable, interconnected community. However, as IED's Chief Operating Officer Emanuele Soldini acknowledges, logistical and administrative challenges limit such exchanges. Issues like full enrollment sections, lack of student housing, and differing accreditation systems across countries complicate mobility of students between campuses.[159]

In response, IED has developed a context-driven strategy, embedding each campus deeply within its local socio-economic fabric. Rather than fostering inter-campus exchanges, Soldini says, the school emphasizes collaborations with local industries, transforming its locations into localized ecosystems that engage directly with the surrounding markets:

"We are very connected to the local area, and we have always emphasized this connection—it has been a fundamental part of our identity since the beginning. The relationship with local businesses significantly influences the type of courses we offer and how we structure them. The courses we run in Madrid have a different focus compared to those we offer in Milan [...]. The expectations of students studying design in Milan are likely different from those in Cagliari, and this affects the projects we develop."[160]

154 Appendix, p. 75–78.
155 *ibid.*
156 *ibid.*
157 The apprenticeship contract is a work contract that allows for alternating periods of training in a company and at an apprenticeship training center. It's also known as *contrat en alternace*. "Contrat d'apprentissage," accessed December 8, 2024, https://www.service-public.fr/particuliers/vosdroits/F2918.
158 Appendix, p. 75–78.
159 *ibid.*, p. 84–86.

This local permeability is particularly evident in the Design X Commons Master program.[161] As program director Angela Rui explains, the pedagogical framework centers on situated learning, requiring student projects to engage directly with external stakeholders such as community associations, cultural institutions, and local governments:

"Every course should be situated—that is, it should always include engagement with an external reality. This can be a company, but ideally, it should be neighborhood associations, cultural institutions, or social-oriented organizations, or even the municipality itself. [...] This is part of the methodology that teaches students that it's no longer possible to work alone. The idea of the solitary designer working in isolation no longer applies when discussing commons and commoning.[162]

Rui emphasizes that this approach extends beyond temporary assignments. Students must understand that their projects are seeds planted in the real world, requiring long-term care and development even after the course ends:

[...] The brief, too, becomes a part of the design process and must be developed in collaboration with a community. This is another core part of the methodology—there needs to be a constant exchange between students and external communities. And we want students to see that their project isn't something that ends after three or six months; instead, it's a seed that they plant, and they must continue caring for it, even if they move on to other things. Just like when you plant a tree, you can't simply abandon it once it's in the ground."[162]

Collaboration between students and faculty is also central to fostering a culture of commoning within educational institutions. In this context, community-building extends beyond the classroom, emphasizing not only student engagement with real-world issues but also active collaboration among mentors.[163] This practice encourages a "curatorial mindset,"[164] where faculty can envision meaningful intersections between their courses and collaboratively design shared projects. It also reinforces a sense of belonging to a broader academic community, moving away from an individualistic and siloed approach. Faculty members can openly share their work, fostering an environment where knowledge becomes a shared resource rather than a guarded possession. Small yet impactful strategies like this exemplify how transparent communication and cross-disciplinary collaboration can cultivate a dynamic ecosystem rooted in mutual support and collective growth.

The development of the Design X Commons Master programs at IED reflects the institution's evolving commitment to research-driven education while maintaining its practice-based learning tradition. The recent integration of a research and PhD program signals an intention to engage with a wider academic audience while embedding deeper theoretical perspectives into its curriculum. This shift promotes transdisciplinarity, challenging the conventional, discipline-specific educational framework that has historically defined academic institutions.

IED's academic leadership views this transition as an application of complexity theory to academic disciplines. The traditional separation of fields is progressively dissolving, fostering an educational environment where students and faculty converge in collaborative labs rather than working within predefined disciplinary silos.[165] This interdisciplinary approach turns the school into a dynamic microcosm where boundaries are intentionally blurred, facilitating cross-pollination of ideas and practices.[166]

Despite its commitment to transdisciplinarity, IED remains aware of the structural tensions inherent in operating within an academic system that still values disciplinary categorization. This creates a paradox: while pushing against rigid academic norms, the institution must navigate the constraints of accreditation and recognition. However, IED's historical ties to cultural and industrial sectors in Italy and Spain offer it a unique advantage. Positioned at the intersection of academia and real-world contexts, it has developed an experimental space where creative practice and theoretical research mutually inform one another. This dual identity serves as both a challenge and an

160 *ibid.*
161 Launched in September 2024, Design X Commons is a Master of Arts program, emphasizing design as a transformative platform to address societal and environmental challenges. It encourages students to engage in interdisciplinary projects, fostering sustainable practices and participatory governance models to promote the regeneration and sharing of common goods. "DesignX Commons Is the Design Focus of IED Master of Arts Programs," accessed December 8, 2024, https://www.ied.edu/news/designxcommons-is-the-design-focus-of-ied-master-of-arts-programs.
162 Appendix, p. 81–84
163 *ibid.*
164 *ibid.*
165 *ibid.*, p. 79–80
166 *ibid.*

opportunity, enabling the institution to function as a laboratory for innovative educational models that extend beyond traditional academic frameworks.

While this ambition holds true for Master's and PhD programs, the compartmentalization of disciplines remains a challenge at the undergraduate level. Students and faculty shared that they feel often operating within isolated silos, with little awareness of what their peers in other courses are working on. The envisioned shift toward a more fluid, interconnected environment—where boundaries between disciplines and communities dissolve—still has significant ground to cover. The network scattered across Italy and abroad provides a multifaceted perspective on design practices shaped by diverse cultures and approaches, while also posing challenges in experimenting with more fluid and transdisciplinary pedagogical models.

3.2.3 Community and External Support: Paris College of Art

If we examine the institutional model developed by Paris College of Art (PCA) over the years, it is essential to acknowledge its historical roots. Originally established as Parsons Paris in 1982, the school underwent a pivotal transformation in 2012 when it separated from its parent institution, which subsequently opened another Paris campus. This split compelled PCA to redefine its identity, reevaluate its partnerships with local industries, and restructure its relationship with the U.S., including its accreditation and international student base. As an independent institution, PCA's relatively recent history presents both challenges and opportunities. Its young legacy offers a degree of flexibility, enabling it to explore new dynamics within its ecosystem, unburdened by entrenched traditions. PCA has, then, strengthened its ties to its ecosystem through strategic pedagogical partnerships with external institutions. A notable example is its global joint degree with Emerson College, which awards a double diploma. This partnership not only reconnects PCA with the U.S. educational landscape but also helps attract American students to its small campus in Paris. While the "co-creation and co-management of the BFA degree with Emerson College" poses challenges in "navigating the accreditation and degree-granting requirements of both institutions,"[167] it secures a critical link to U.S. academic culture and serves as a potential model for future collaborations.

Another key partnership rooted, this time, in the French context is the MA Design for Social Impact (MDES), co-developed with makesense—an international organization, with a strong presence in Paris, that fosters social and environmental impact by connecting individuals, organizations, and communities through collaborative projects, innovative solutions, and transformative learning experiences.[168] Launched in 2015, the program emerged from a shared ambition to create "something very experiential, grounded in real-world problems, which we both valued."[169] As PCA President Linda Jarvin explains:

> "The origin story is essentially about combining the experiential knowledge of makesense with the academic and theoretical education we could offer. The aim was to structure it as a master's degree, providing both experiential knowledge and theoretical foundations, teaching students how to research and write, among other academic skills."[170]

In terms of co-construction with an external organization, this collaboration brings added value not only to students but also to the institution itself. It requires the school to engage in meaningful negotiation to find a balance between its pedagogical framework and the expertise offered by its partner. As Linda Jarvin emphasized:

> "It's not like we're subcontracting part of the education to someone else. It's really something we created together. And it wouldn't be the same program if we weren't doing it together. [...] I believe co-creation is essential, and it's quite stimulating. It introduces more perspectives and brings in additional knowledge. [...] However, like any collaborative project, it requires more planning, discussions, and consensus-building. It's not as straightforward as a program managed entirely in-house, where everything is predefined—courses, teachers, and structure."[171]

This model of collaboration, distinct from the preservation strategy adopted by ENSCI, is also possible because of PCA's relatively young

167 *ibid.*, p. 87–88
168 *"Accueil," makesense, accessed December 12, 2024, https://france.makesense.org/.*
169 Appendix, p. 87–88
170 *ibid.*
171 *ibid.*

institutional history, which allows it to break free from deep-rooted traditions. Its openness to integrating external resources, organizations, and industry partners can foster innovative pedagogical models that blend theoretical inquiry with experiential learning: as Victor Senave—co-director of MDES—explains, the program, taking advantage of makesense's experiential, place-based ethos, it extends the classroom beyond the school's walls. This approach reflects a pedagogical commitment to addressing ecological and social transitions through engagement with the surrounding community. Courses are frequently held off-campus, fostering relationships with local businesses, and community organizations. Even classes not inherently linked to fieldwork, such as design thinking, are occasionally conducted in local venues like cafés or social hubs. This immersive strategy enables students to form human connections with local stakeholders while grappling with global challenges through a localized lens.[172]

Nevertheless, one notable drawback of this model is the limited integration of MDES students into the broader PCA community. The program's short duration and predominantly off-campus structure leave little time for students to engage meaningfully with their peers across school. While this approach strengthens PCA's presence in the highly competitive Parisian educational landscape—dominated by prestigious public institutions and emerging international private schools—and connects students directly with the French professional market, it does not foster a strong internal community. This contrasts with the model seen at ENSCI, where a more immersive and centralized structure supports deep interconnections within the school's internal ecosystem.

3.2.4 Commoning and Hybrid Decision-Making

In the previous section, we discussed how pedagogy tradition and legacy influence an institution's connection with its external community and surrounding ecosystem. However, the question of legacy extends beyond external relations, playing a critical role in shaping internal dynamics—particularly concerning the governance[173] of the institutions themselves.

Changing the governance system within an already established institution seems an impossible endeavor. Nevertheless, we can observe transformative examples of shared governance in newly founded schools or cutting-edge educational initiatives. The *Institut Supérieur de Design de Saint-Malo*, founded in 2017, for instance, operates as France's first higher education cooperative (SCIC)[174], fostering inclusive, participative governance where students, companies, local authorities, and employees collaborate under the principle of "one person, one vote." This model promotes social innovation through accessible, community-driven design education, addressing contemporary challenges like ecological sustainability, territorial development, and systemic change.[175]

The free open source community of Processing remains a significant source of inspiration for its evolution into a comprehensive platform operating as a commons. Reflecting on the 10th anniversary of p5.js—a JavaScript web library created by Lauren McCarthy, a key figure in the Processing community and advisor at the Processing Foundation—McCarthy discussed the implementation of a rotational leadership model within the project. This governance structure has demonstrated the community's ability to sustain the project through collective legacy and shared responsibility, ensuring its continuity and resilience over time.[176] Moreover, the School for Poetic Computation (SFPC) stands as a compelling example of shifting governance from centralized leadership to a shared, community-driven model. Amid the COVID-19 crisis and the surge of the Black liberation movement in 2020, SFPC underwent a significant structural transformation aimed at fostering a more inclusive and socially-just educational environment. As noted in the SFPC blog,

> "In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing Black liberation movement, the stewards, along with other SFPC teachers and workers, have been advocating for SFPC to make transformations towards becoming a healthier place to study and work for people who have a variety of identities and needs."[177]

This transformation resonates with broader movements in art and design schools where students reclaim educational spaces as safe

172 *ibid.*, p. 89–90.
173 The act or process of governing or overseeing the control and direction of something (such as a country or an organization). "Governance Definition and Meaning," accessed December 12, 2024, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/governance.
174 *Société Coopérative d'Intérêt Collectif.*
175 Julien Vey, "*Modèle coopératif*," Institut Supérieur de Design de Saint-Malo (blog), accessed December 12, 2024, https://institut.design/notre-modele-cooperatif/.
176 *A Message from Lauren McCarthy, Creator of P5 for Decade of Code*, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ft4XohXlqU.
177 Zainab Aliyu et al., "School for Poetic Computation," accessed December 14, 2024, https://sfpc.study/blog/a-beautiful-school.

environments for expressing and redefining identities.[178] SFPC formalized this shift by adopting a co-written community agreement, emphasizing collective responsibility and shared governance. The school's founders stepped back, allowing a collective of students and educators to lead, aiming to move "beyond poetry" and "towards a beautiful school."[179]

These examples offer valuable inspiration for rethinking institutional dynamics through shared governance and collective responsibility. However, implementing such models within formalized, traditionally hierarchical institutions presents considerable challenges. Achieving meaningful change would require intentional restructuring, including shifts in leadership approaches, policy frameworks, and cultural mindsets toward collaboration and community-driven decision-making.

In the context of commons-based governance, sociologist Sébastien Shulz suggests a hybrid management approach inspired by cooperative systems like *La Louve*, a self-managed supermarket. He explains:

> "What you're saying reminds me of the distinction between self-management and a form of representative or participatory democracy when it comes to strategic decisions within a school. To illustrate this, I'm part of a cooperative supermarket called La Louve. [...] There are two levels of decision-making at La Louve. On one hand, there are collective decisions about the supermarket's overarching directions, made during general assemblies. [...] On the other hand, La Louve employs eight salaried workers who manage their daily tasks autonomously. It's not the members of the cooperative who dictate how they organize their daily work. [...] This shows two forms of democratization: one that concerns the major strategic decisions and another that involves self-management of daily activities."[180]

Shulz's proposal highlights how mixed governance models can balance participatory decision-making with structured oversight, fostering a more inclusive institutional ecosystem. His perspective also connects to Elinor Ostrom's theory of polycentrism, which emphasizes nested systems of governance where multiple layers of decision-making coexist:

> "It's a good example of what Elinor Ostrom calls polycentrism. This concept applies here because it involves multiple layers of decision-making coexisting. These different levels are interconnected, sometimes with tensions between them. [...] So, you have nested systems, and it's not total autonomy."[181]

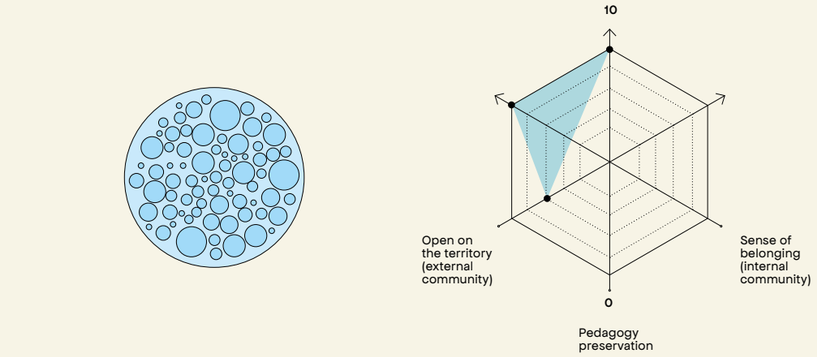
This approach highlights the potential for adaptable, layered governance structures that combine decentralized management with collective strategic planning—a promising model for rethinking governance in complex institutional settings. It is not about entirely changing the institution's governance but rather about identifying internal spaces where alternative governance practices could emerge. By embracing the concept of hybridization, schools can explore new forms of decision-making and collaboration within existing structures, fostering more inclusive and dynamic institutional ecosystems.

3.2.5 Time: A Third Resource

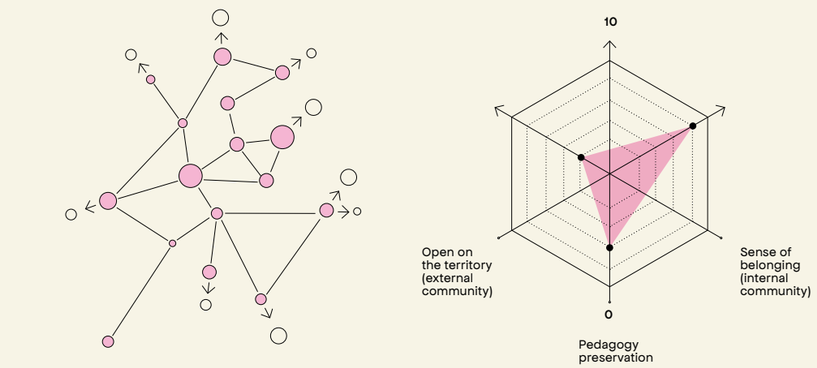
If hybrid decision-making models offer promising inspirations for reshaping the governance of educational institutions, their success depend on sustaining long-term commitment from all community actors. Without active engagement and shared responsibility, even the most innovative frameworks risk stagnation or failure. This underscores the critical need to cultivate a culture of continuous participation, mutual accountability, and collective investment within institutional ecosystems.

We previously established that ENSCI fosters a strong internal community, contributing to a deep sense of belonging and commitment among its students. This sense of ownership becomes particularly evident during moments of collective action, such as the strikes triggered by the appointment of a new director. This engagement is partly due to the school's five-year program structure, where students often delay graduation by one or two years, making the school an essential part of their daily lives. With the school open 24/7, students experience a unique level of immersion, reinforcing their attachment to the institution. This connection translates into proactive participation in the school's management and pedagogical development. A notable example is the BDE's (Student Office) campaign to review and amend the

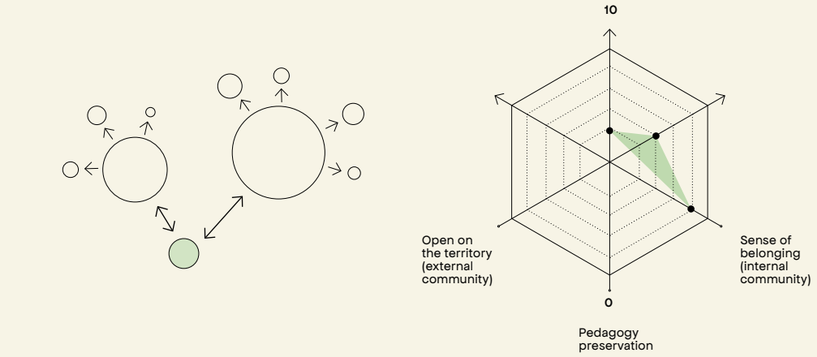
178 See chapter 2, section 2.2.1
179 Aliyu et al., "School for Poetic Computation."
180 Appendix, p. 73-75.
181 *ibid.*



ENSCI - LES ATELIERS: **INSULAR MODEL**



ISTITUTO EUROPEO DI DESIGN: **NETWORK MODEL**



PARIS COLLEGE OF ART: **SYMBIOTIC MODEL**

RIGHT **Three models emerge from the case studies: The Insular Model, characterized by a strong community and sense of belonging, a focus on critical thinking, and an unwavering commitment to maintaining pedagogical integrity; the Network Model, which features a network of campuses, each closely tied to its local territory with a flexible, context-driven pedagogy, fostering a strong identity while placing less emphasis on preserving a unified pedagogical approach; and the Symbiotic Model, defined by connections with external partners to engage broader audiences and markets, emphasizing mutual benefit and collaboration, while its identity continues to evolve.**

LEFT **The way institutions choose to preserve their pedagogy significantly influences the development of both their internal community (sense of belonging) and their external community (connection to the territory).**

school's internal regulations. Students actively debated proposed policies, striving for a collective voice in shaping what is allowed or restricted, rather than delegating such decisions to the administration.

This culture of engagement has, unfortunately, waned in recent years for two key reasons. As Simon d'Hénin points out, the school faces an aging faculty and staff. As long-time members—who played pivotal roles in shaping the institution's community-driven ethos—retire, a cultural void emerges, weakening internal participation.[182] Furthermore, as some older students observed, incoming students at ENSCI today tend to be younger than in previous years. In the past, many students joined the school after completing degrees elsewhere or gaining professional experience, often driven by a clear intention to deepen their skills or pivot toward a design career. In contrast, newer cohorts, arriving directly from their high-school diploma, seem to approach ENSCI more like a "regular school," just a step towards the completion of their "regular" academic path, and being, thus, less inclined toward extracurricular engagement. This shift has led to a reduced sense of long-term commitment and a diminished interest in participating actively in the school's governance and community-driven initiatives.

The question of student engagement and legacy appears, then, inherently tied to the temporal structure of academic programs. The five-year program model, common in French art and design schools and culminating in a master's-level diploma, fosters deeper commitment and long-term student involvement—qualities often lacking in shorter master's programs, continuing education courses, or bachelor's degrees.

Institutions like IED or PCA face challenges in sustaining student engagement due to shorter program durations: bachelor programs and maters are not consequential, and students can come for just the BFA or an MA or MFA, committing to one or two years of studies in the institution. A notable example of the lack of students' commitment in the community of the school is PCA's struggle to maintain a stable student council, as its most active members are often master's students who leave after one or two years, creating a continuity gap. This reflects a trade-off: while PCA excels in forging connections with external partners, its internal student culture remains less cohesive. As a result, students often pursue their academic paths independently, feeling disconnected from the institution. This disconnection also discourages them from initiating change, as institutional processes can seem lengthy and inaccessible within their limited time at the school.

Time emerges as a crucial variable for fostering commitment and building legacy within educational institutions. It can be considered a third pooled resource essential for enabling an effective community-building dynamic—one that sustains, nurtures, and perpetuates the community, ensuring its continuity and resilience over time.

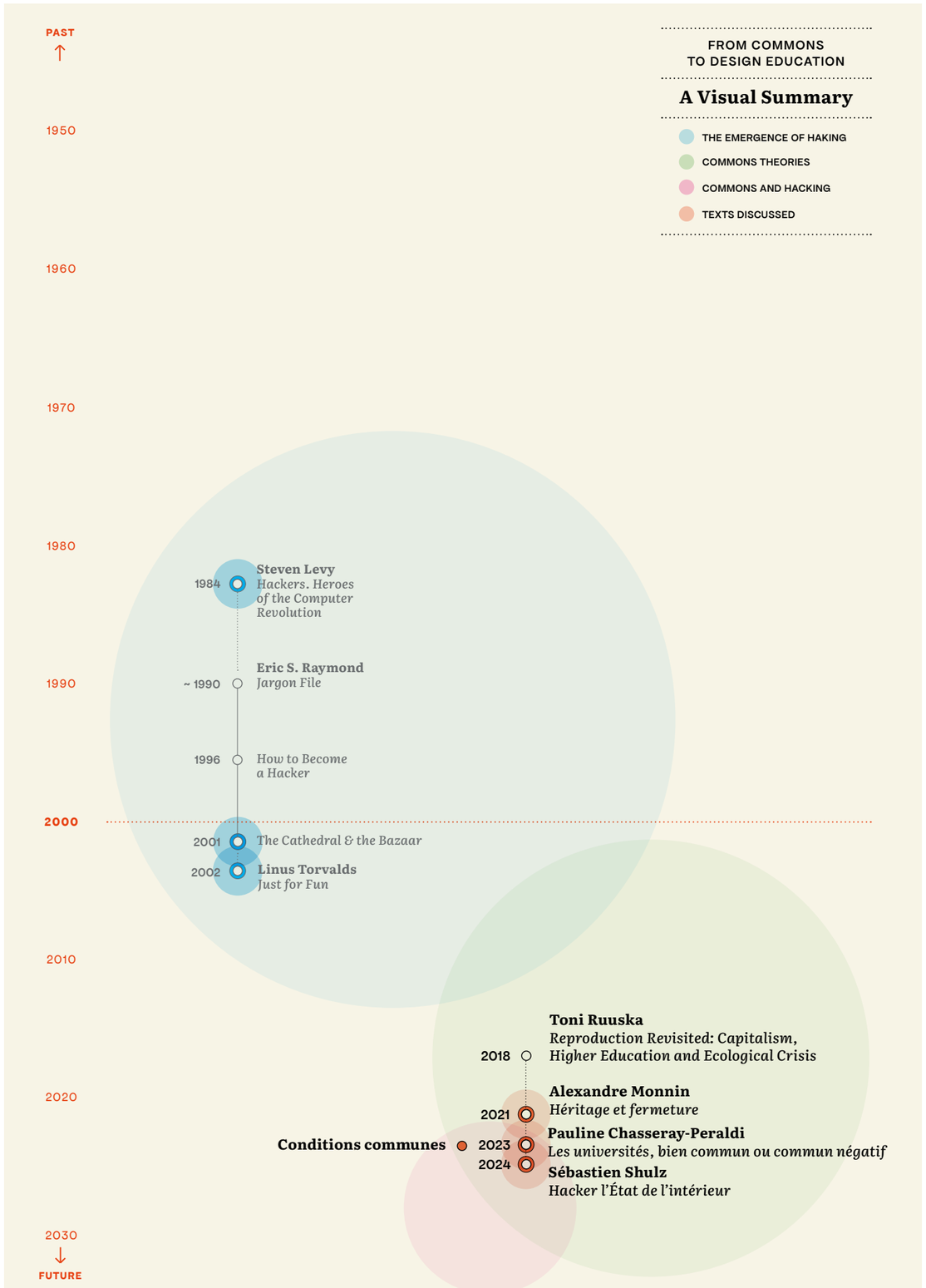
Preliminary Conclusion: Design School as a Commons

Throughout this chapter, we have explored how resources in design schools function not only as assets but also as essential tools for building and sustaining communities. Space and tools—and ultimately time—while central to creative production, also facilitate collaboration—creating synergies among students and fostering interactions with other actors of the institution such as faculty and staff. Our analysis of key institutions such as PCA, IED, and ENSCI also demonstrated how pedagogy shapes the relationship between schools and their surrounding ecosystems. These institutions exemplify how educational methodologies influence external connections while developing internal practices that support both their pedagogical missions and broader community engagement. We also considered how preserving and managing a school's community and its resources can be challenged by temporal factors, including program duration and generational shifts within the institution. Short-term programs and aging faculty can disrupt the continuity of institutional culture, while new students and staff may struggle to engage with traditions that risk being lost over time.

These reflections underscore the complexity of higher education institutions, illustrating how commons-based frameworks intersect with the educational landscape. Resources, communities—both internal and external—and the act of commoning are interdependent, collectively shaping the institution's success and its educational mission. Recognizing this interconnection reinforces the notion that "commoning" in design education is itself a design process. The process of "building a school" inherently connects resources, communities, and commoning in a continuous, interdependent cycle—each element influencing and sustaining the others. This cycle reflects an iterative process defined by dynamic phases of creation, negotiation, adaptation, and renewal—core principles of iterative design. Like design itself, commoning is non-linear, evolving through cycles of shared use, collective reflection, and collaborative improvement. It relies on sustained engagement, reciprocal contributions, and adaptability. By emphasizing this iterative nature, the thesis highlights commoning as an evolving practice that continuously designs, redesigns, and renews social, cultural, and material resources.

Referring back to the definition of the commons and the dynamics of commoning established at the end of the first chapter, we see that the three pillars we have identified as a grid of analysis throughout this research—resources, community, and commoning—are inherently interconnected within an iterative loop. This cycle emphasizes continuous testing and experimentation, not only of practices and processes but also of the resources themselves, creating a system where adaptation and co-evolution—with internal struggles or external frictions—are central to sustaining the school as a commons. •

182 Appendix, p. 75-78.



[CONCLUSION]

From Commons to Design Education

For whom do we study?
For whom do we teach?
For whom and why do we produce research? Under what conditions is knowledge produced?
How can we move beyond education and research driven by accumulation?
And finally, and most importantly, how can we formulate and share this knowledge in ways that foster understanding and meaningful dialogue?[183]

— PAULINE CHASSERAY-PERALDI, 2023

In this research, we have explored how art and design higher education could be rethought through the lens of the commons theories. Since Elinor Ostrom's Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 2009, the framework of the commons has entered the global debate on the accelerating depletion of resources, offering a compelling perspective on how we can use, manage, and share them more responsibly. This shift has prompted designers to reconsider their roles and practices, emphasizing responsibility and active participation in shaping a sustainable future. It has also led us to expand this reflection beyond making or designing to include teaching, reshaping education in response to urgent environmental, social, and ethical concerns, and encouraging future designers to recognize their responsibilities and the implications of their creative acts.

While the notion of commons in design education is relatively new, the influence of free open source culture has long provided alternative educational models that challenge conventional practices. Emerging as a subculture 'in-between' spaces at the end of the 20th century, it evolved into a significant cultural force in art and design over the past two decades. As educational project as the School for Poetic Computation or the Processing Foundation has proven, its principles align closely with the ethos of the commons—especially since the digital commons became prominent in the commons discourse—and it can be a blueprint for understanding how sustaining and preserving resources—such as knowledge—is inherently linked to sustaining the community itself. In this context, the community becomes a commons, an inherent resource to sustain, that must be preserved through the continuous act of commoning.[184]

Yet, the challenge of embedding commons-based practices into educational settings is compounded by institutional structures that are often rigid and hierarchical. The crisis in art and design education is systemic, rooted in both internal struggles and external pressures: institutional priorities are increasingly driven by their economic models and market expectations; students experience distress and seek transformative change in educational spaces that often reflect societal inequalities. Addressing this crisis requires more than pedagogical adjustments—it calls for rethinking the institution's social fabric to build supportive, resilient learning communities.

This perspective invites a rethinking of educational spaces as collaborative laboratories where the boundaries between teaching, learning, and creating dissolve. By consequence what has become critical in

183 Pauline Chasseray-Peraldi, "*Les Universités, Bien Commun Ou Commun Négatif : Capitalisme, Infrastructures, Encombrements*," November 6, 2023.

184 Commoning is understood as the "social process that both creates and sustains the commons, including governance and community-led self-management," as defined by Massimo de Angelis. See Chapter 1, "Preliminary Conclusions: Establishing a Definition."

the educational paradigm is not only what we teach, but how we teach it and how we create the conditions necessary for preserving not only the knowledge, but also the institutional community. Institutional dynamics are just as important—if not more so—than the content of courses or the pedagogical methodologies themselves.

Using the three pillars of the commons—as defined by Massimo De Angelis—'pooled resources,' 'community,' and 'commoning,' we have analyzed how key aspects of schools can be reimagined and rethought. Examples supporting this reconsideration highlight several critical dimensions of education. Space can be envisioned as nomadic and hybrid learning environments that adapt to evolving pedagogical needs. Tools can be understood as critical, frugal, and sustainable resources that support learning while acknowledging ecological limits. Time emerges as a vital asset, essential for nurturing and sustaining institutional legacy through reflective and cumulative practices. Finally, the school itself can be recognized as a social fabric central to pedagogy, where learning is embedded in a community sustained by shared values and collective responsibility.

In this context, 'commoning' becomes, then, an act of design. The act of 'building a school' inherently connects resources, communities, and the practice of commoning in a continuous, interdependent cycle—each element influencing and sustaining the others. This dynamic process—shaped through cycles of creation, negotiation, adaptation, and renewal—mirrors principles of prototyping and iteration in design. Like design itself, commoning is non-linear, evolving through shared use, collective reflection, and collaborative improvement. It depends on sustained engagement, mutual contributions, and adaptability. Schools can, thus, function as living and evolving systems where shared resources and collective learning create the foundation for cultivating critically engaged, socially responsible designers.

These reflections form the core discoveries of this research, outlining a new framework for envisioning the school of tomorrow: the theories of commons become both a pedagogical approach and a methodological framework, fostering a community-driven learning environment that involves far more than sharing physical resources—it requires cultivating a shared sense of responsibility and mutual engagement.

How can we, then, enact transformative change within the complex environment of educational institutions? In her essay *Les universités, bien commun ou commun négatif : capitalisme, infrastructures, encombrements* ("Universities: Common Good or Negative Commons? Capitalism, Infrastructures, Congestion"), written for the inaugural event of *Conditions Communes*[185] in November 2023, researcher Pauline Chasseray-Peraldi prompts us to transform educational institutions in positive commons[186]—in resonance with Alexandre Monnin's reflections on negative commons.[187]

Framing her inquiry as "examining the conditions of existence of higher education within the context that some suggest calling the Anthropocene or Capitalocene,"[188] Chasseray-Peraldi explores the entanglements of higher education and neoliberalism, echoing Toni Ruuska's *Reproduction Revisited: Capitalism, Higher Education and Ecological Crisis*.[189] Reflecting on the first iteration of her collaborative research project, she recalls: "The first form [of this reflection] more or less took the title 'Thinking and Writing in the Cracks: Subverting Collective Research Practices.'"[190] Her work underscores, then, the importance of exploring 'in-between' spaces—the cracks—as vital sites where alternative perspectives can emerge, fostering possibilities for subversion and transformation within institutional structures. Circling back (as an iterative loop) to the free open source culture, hacking[191] is, then, a possible framework for reforming institution to enact meaningful change in art and design education, as also suggested by the sociologist Sébastien Shulz in his article "*Hacker l'État de l'intérieur. Éléments pour une sociologie du travail de réforme à l'ère numérique*" ("Hacking the State from within: the sociology of reform work in the digital era")[192] and reiterated in his interview:

> "There can also be local experiments where self-organization is left to students, professors, or staff members. These experiments might sometimes contradict the institution's general rules, but they're part of a process of experimentation. The idea is to test these alternatives and then evaluate if they work, to draw lessons for future strategic decisions. It creates a dialogue between local experiments and centralized decisions."[193]

In this perspective, educational institutions can be reimagined as spaces of continuous experimentation rather than fixed systems bound by rigid structures where hacking, understood as a critical and creative practice, can become a legitimate method for reshaping educational environments from within. The cracks within institutions are, then, not failures but spaces for innovation, resistance, and transformation. •

185 *Conditions Communes* is both a research collective and a series of events. Its first cycle takes place between autumn 2023 and summer 2024 in Paris, Marseille, and Liège, bringing together researchers and individuals who sustain scientific practices beyond traditional institutions. This series aims to collectively explore the frictions encountered in the concrete practices of science. The first symposium is titled *Savoirs, précarités* (Knowledge, Precarity).

186 Chasseray-Peraldi, "*Les Universités, Bien Commun Ou Commun Négatif.*

187 Bonnet, Landivar, and Monnin, *Héritage et fermeture.*

188 Chasseray-Peraldi, "*Les Universités, Bien Commun Ou Commun Négatif.*"

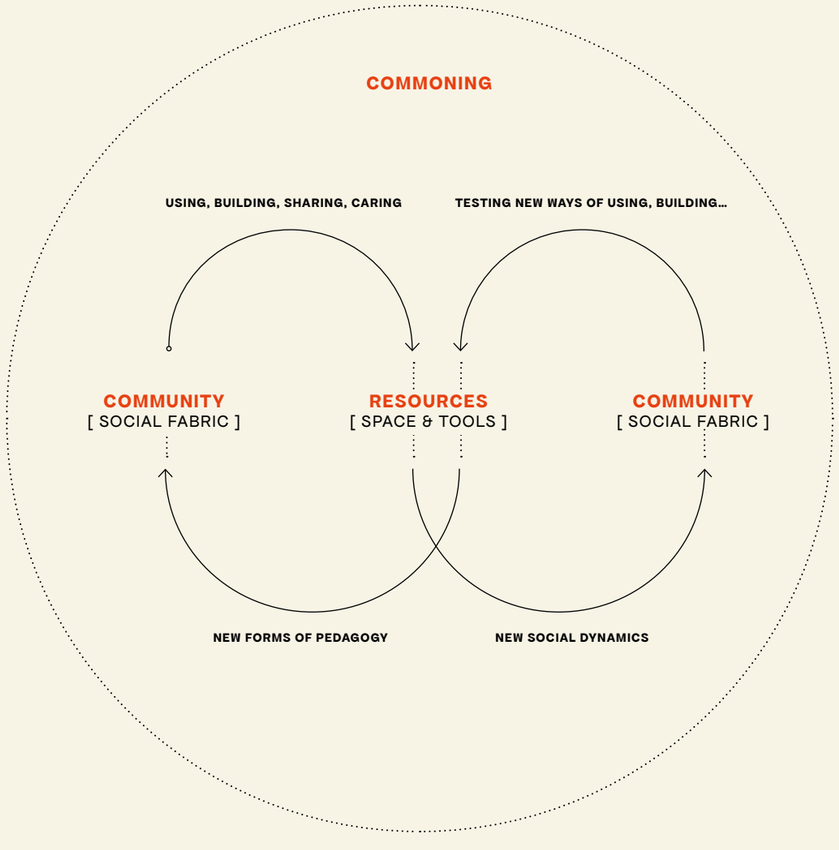
189 Toni Ruuska, *Reproduction Revisited: Capitalism, Higher Education and Ecological Crisis* (Mayflybooks/Ephemera, 2018).

190 Chasseray-Peraldi, "*Les Universités, Bien Commun Ou Commun Négatif.*"

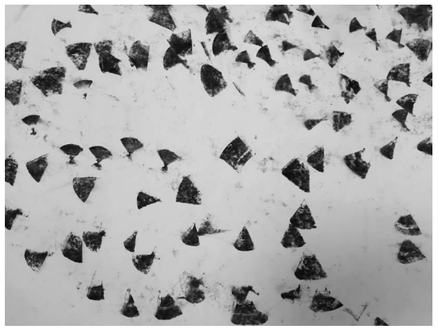
191 Hacking is the practice of creatively solving problems, building new tools, and exploring the limits of existing systems. It is guided by principles of decentralization, collaboration, and free access to technology and information. Hacking involves experimentation, often occurring in informal or unconventional settings, where constraints inspire innovative solutions. The hacker culture stands as foundational for the free open source culture. Russo, *From Processing to Design.* Section 1.2 "From Hackers to FLOSS (Free/Libre Open Source Software): A Moral Debate," 12–16.

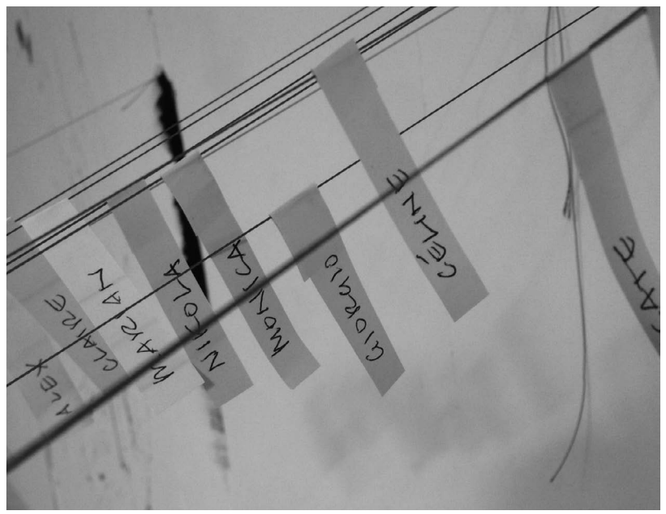
192 In this article, Shulz emphasizes experimentation, hybridization, and autonomy as essential pillars for institutional reform. He argues that while experiments often face resistance from those invested in maintaining the status quo, these challenges can be overcome through institutional hybridization or by carving out autonomous spaces for alternative practices. This dynamic process aligns with the iterative, adaptive logic of hacking, offering a model for applied research grounded in the theoretical principles explored in this thesis. Sébastien Shulz, "*Hacker l'État de l'intérieur. Éléments pour une sociologie du travail de réforme à l'ère numérique,*" Sociologie du travail 66, no. 3 (September 15, 2024), https://doi.org/10.4000/12atj.

193 Appendix, p. 73–75.



BELOW **Commoning as an act of design transforms schools into living systems where resources and communities are interconnected in a continuous cycle of creation, adaptation, and renewal. This approach mirrors the design process itself—iterative and collaborative—shaping education as a space for critical engagement and the cultivation of socially responsible designers.**





Images from Offschool workshops. TOP ***Book as Three-Dimensional Space***; MIDDLE LEFT ***Blind Drawing***; MIDDLE RIGHT ***A Matter of Ink***; BELOW ***New Measures***.

[BEYOND THE CONCLUSION]

Narratives of Pedagogical Experimentation

To move beyond a theoretical conclusion, it becomes essential to transition from inquiry to action by applying the principles explored throughout this research. How can these ideas be made impactful and embedded in real-world contexts? The answer lies in translating theoretical insights into experimental practices that challenge existing educational institutions while fostering new ways of teaching, learning, and collaborating.

From this perspective, reviving Offschool[194] and redefining its scope as a platform for critical engagement offers an opportunity to transform an educational project started as intuitive into a structured initiative grounded in the theoretical framework. In its renewed form, Offschool could function both as a site of experimentation and a mechanism for institutional critique, fostering innovative practices while challenging existing educational structures.

From Experimental Ethos to a Tool for Institutional Change

Founded in 2013 as an independent platform proposing workshops, talks, and roundtables on art, design, and architecture, Offschool has embraced a deeply experimental ethos from the beginning. Its launch, marked by the *Prototype Day*, featured three workshops: *New Measures*, exposing the vulnerabilities of measurement devices, *Book as Three-Dimensional Space*, deconstructing the internal narratives of books through the observation of the interconnection of content and container, *Productive Reading*, experimenting with what new or unexpected forms a reading of a work of literature might take. In the following months and years this experience was followed by other equally experimental workshops and talks—including, for instance, *Paper and Pencil Programming*, *Blind Drawing*, *A Matter of Ink*, and *Practical Actions Towards Ethical Technology*.[195] From the outset, these events were designed as critical spaces, encouraging participants to reflect on their practices, while encompassing social and political issues in their reflection. The workshops and talks took place in the rooms of PCA and were open not specifically to the school's students—though they were welcome—but to a broader community of architects, artists, and designers eager to explore their disciplines from more critical perspectives. At the time, Offschool was not conceived as a tool to drive institutional change, and it positioned itself in opposition to traditional systems rather than as a complement to them.

A few years later, my master's degree project in transdisciplinary new media revisited the theme of pedagogical experimentation. *A New *New* Program for Graphic Design*, developed in 2022, was a proposal to critically examine the tools used in graphic design within higher education institutions. The project advocated for a

194 See Introduction.
195 Offschool (@offschool), Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/offschool_/.

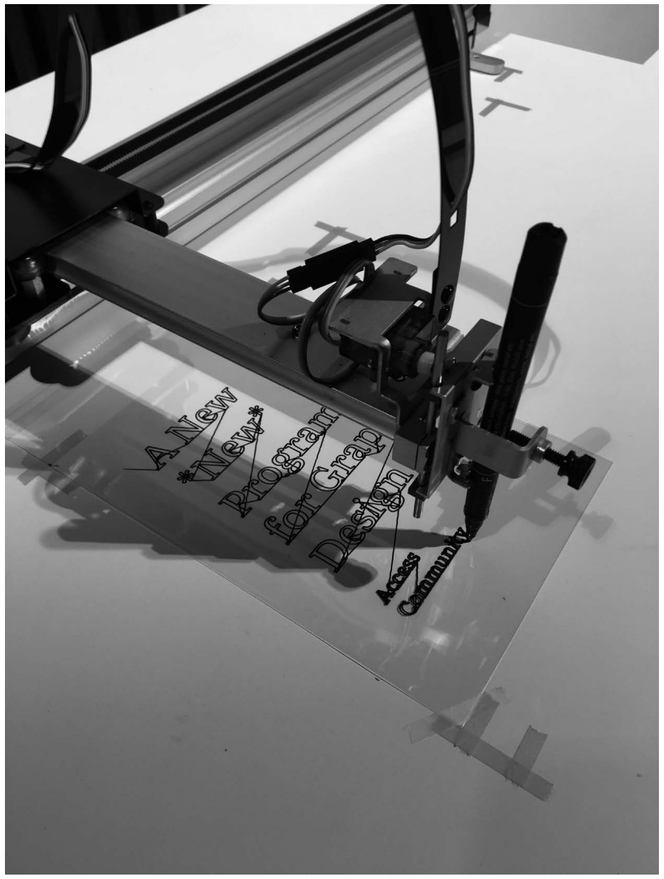
"do with what you have" approach, emphasizing the adoption of frugal tools to promote sustainable design practices. This pedagogical initiative built upon the theoretical framework established in my thesis, "From Processing to Design: Free Open Source Culture and the Redefinition of Contemporary Design Practice," aiming to translate these ideas into actionable, critical strategies. Still, this experimentation, serving as a second prototype anchored within the institutional setting, remained a personal inquiry—not yet intended as a proposal for institutional change.

Building on these foundations, Offschool has the potential to extend these principles further. By reimagining Offschool not merely as an independent platform for experimental workshops but as a tool for pedagogical innovation—a "hacking device" for educational experimentation—it could serve, in collaboration with institution, as a driver of meaningful institutional change. Engaging students, faculty, staff and leadership in informal workshops that bridge theoretical insights with applied research, this project could create opportunities for thoughtful exploration and impactful change. Acting as a litmus paper, Offschool could highlight institutional imbalances, inconsistencies, and systemic injustices while offering a space for recalibration and transformation. In this renewed vision, it could function as a collaborative tool operating at the intersection of institutions and community actors, fostering meaningful dialogue and systemic reform.

MikroUtopies X Offschool: Field Work

Reviving the Offschool project began by reconnecting with its community, laying the groundwork for renewed engagement. This initial phase involved faire du terrain, gathering perspectives from institutional actors (particularly students) to identify desired changes, especially those tied to social dynamics and justice. This approach aimed to understand the needs of those directly involved in the community of an institution while addressing systemic challenges within educational environments.

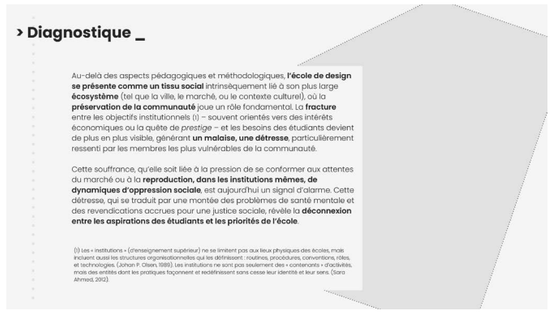
As explored in previously this thesis,[196] design schools function as social fabrics,

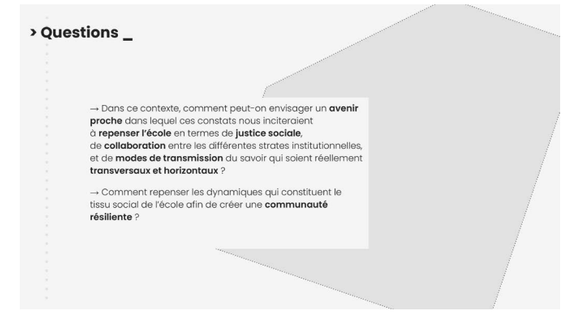


intricately connected to broader ecosystems. Within these networks, preserving the institutional community and fostering change by addressing the social dynamics within institutions is essential to enable more inclusive and collaborative practices. Drawing inspiration from Sara Ahmed's *Complaint!*,[197] starting from listening to grievances or "discomforts" seemed critical to reveal how their underlying power could foster meaningful change. This perspective strongly influenced Offschool's first action to explore and gather how students where feeling about their institutions to calibrate the following actions to put in place. The first actions aimed to reframe complaints not as disruptions but as tools for institutional transformation.

In November 2024, we organized a prototype workshop in collaboration with Laurane Coudriet at ENSCI, marking the first step toward Offschool's reenactment and redefinition. *MikroUtopies*, a design fiction writing workshop initiated by

196 See Chapter 2.
197 Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*.



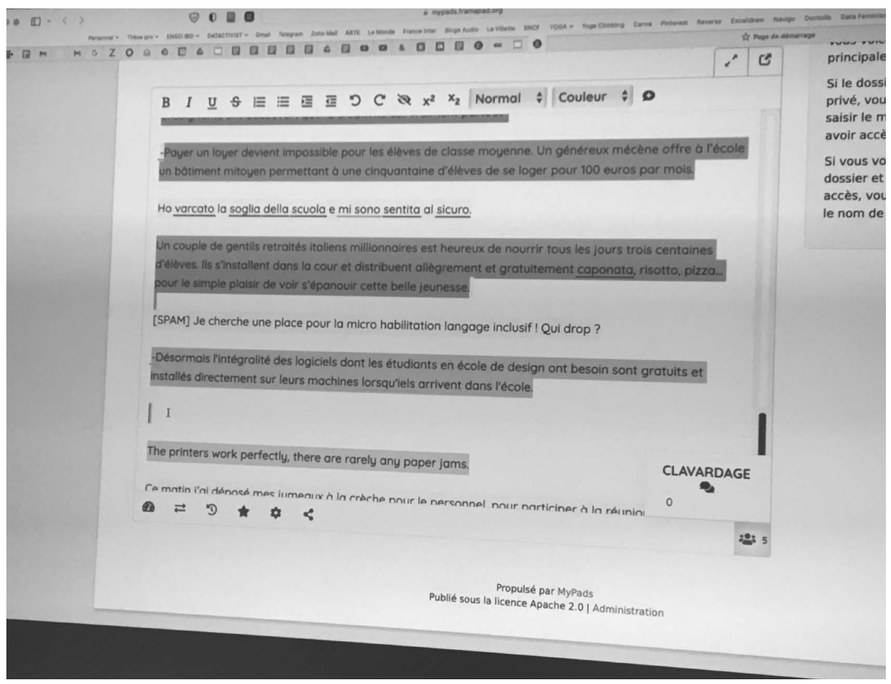


LEFT ***A New *New* Program for Graphic Design*, exhibited at Bastille Design Center, in Paris, in May 2023.**

HERE **Introductory slides from the design fiction workshop *MikroUtopies*.** Graphic Design: Laurane Coudriet.

RIGHT **Invitation to the workshop *MikroUtopies*.**

HERE **Images from the *MikroUtopies* workshop, held at the *Centre Documentation* at ENSCI–Les Ateliers, in November 2024.**



document overlooked emotional and social dynamics. This methodology transformed feelings of unease into meaningful reflection and critique.

The concept was straightforward: participants began by identifying a situation of unease they have experienced—such as a misunderstanding with the institution, an act of discrimination, or a social injustice that had left an impact on them. From there, they were encouraged to imagine a scenario, in a 'not-to-far' future, in which this unease no longer existed. Through this process, participants created micro-utopian fictions, drawing inspiration from personal experiences, references, or texts that resonated with them. Once the *MikroUtopies* were crafted, participants shared them on a digital platform, contributing their optimistic, utopian visions for a more desirable future in design education. By the end of the workshop, these shared stories not only fostered a collective reimagining of what design education could become but also revealed hidden pain points—issues that might otherwise remain undetected or difficult to identify.

The Small Catalogue of Poetic Complaints

This prototype workshop served as the foundation and inspiration for a larger initiative: a series of publications titled *The Small Catalogue of Poetic Complaints*. Its first iteration emerged as an experimental, collaborative publication, crafted during the MikroUtopies workshop. This inaugural edition functioned both as a record of the insights gathered during the workshop and as a blueprint for future editions.

The Small Catalogue of Poetic Complaints seeks to amplify the voices of diverse actors across different schools and formats, offering a broader and more nuanced perspective on the challenges faced by higher education institutions in design. By gathering poetic expressions of unease and discomfort experienced within these institutions, the project reframes these emotions as catalysts for critical reflection and creative reimagination—a hacked and subversive take on traditional surveys. As an investigative tool, it introduces an unconventional approach to conducting 'fieldwork' within the context of design education: testimonies

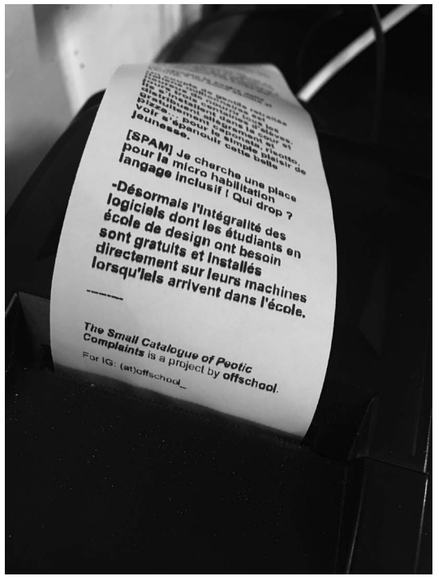
Coudriet in 2024 and inspired by François Houste's *Mikrodystopies*,[198] offered a unique methodology for exploring institutional challenges. Originally conceived as speculative texts limited to 280 characters,[199] *MikroUtopies* encourages reflection on contemporary issues by projecting participants into alternative and desirable futures. This poetic and sensitive approach was chosen as a compelling methodology to capture the voices of students, faculty, and staff—gathering feedback on their experiences, struggles, and challenges while providing a nuanced exploration of institutional life.

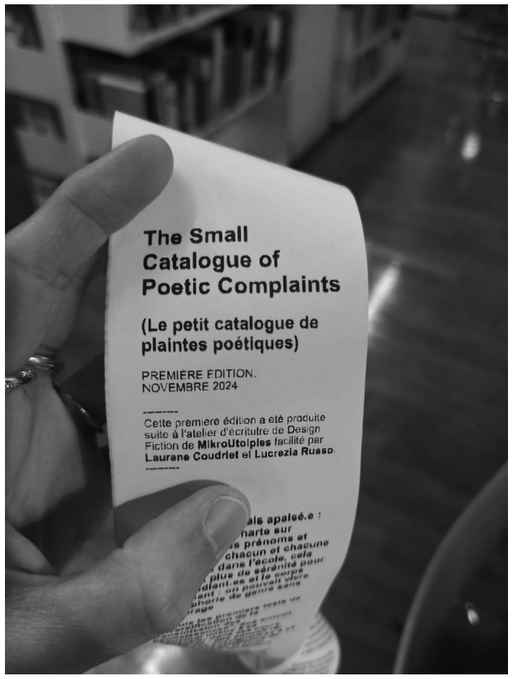
The workshop deliberately created a space to address the 'unease' often felt within educational institutions. Rather than dismissing this discomfort, it positioned unease as a catalyst for transformation, framing it not as an obstacle but as a driver for meaningful change. Unlike traditional frontal surveys, which can often feel intimidating or detached, *MikroUtopies* employed an accessible and inclusive approach to

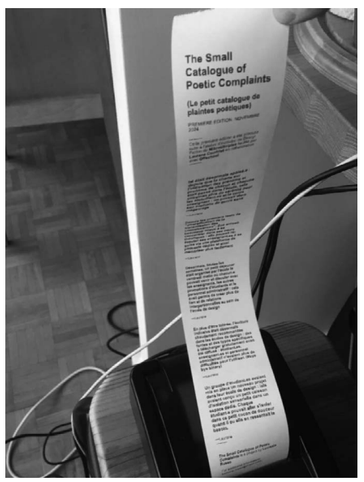
198 François Houste, *Mikrodystopies* (Caen: CF, 2020).

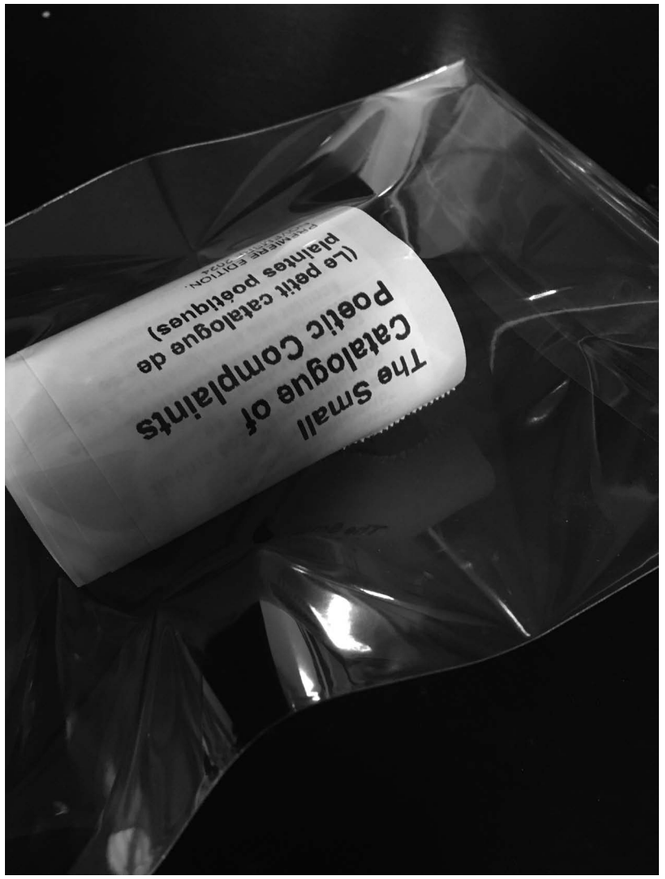
199 Originally, François Houste's *Mikrodystopies* began on the Twitter account @mikrodystopies in 2018. The 280-character limit for each text pays homage to the project's origins on the platform.

HERE **First edition of *The Small Catalogue for Poetic Complaints*, produced and printed during the workshop *MikroUtopies*, in November 2024.**









are gathered through writing workshops to create short novels, graphic novels, and even memes, favoring an approach that is sensitive, inclusive, and occasionally ironic. In contrast to formal or administrative surveys—which are often perceived as intimidating or detached—this poetic and sensitive method provides an accessible and engaging way to document the lived experiences and emotional landscapes of students, educators, and staff.

The first edition, created during the *MikroUtopies* workshop, took the form of a printed zine resembling a receipt—an implicit critique of the capitalist and commercial dynamics ingrained in design schools. This edition also utilized a web-based platform to collect testimonies through digital open tools, fostering accessibility and collaboration. Future editions may explore formats such as risograph prints, wall displays, or photocopied zines, adapting to the specific locations, workshop contexts, and topics addressed.

By gathering and amplifying the voices of those within institutions through unconventional means, *The Small Catalogue of Poetic Complaints* becomes both a platform for alternative expression and a catalyst for rethinking and reshaping institutional dynamics. Its frugal and collaborative production methods embody Offschool's ethos of experimentation, reinforcing its mission to serve as a tool for meaningful change.

And Beyond

The Small Catalogue for Poetic Complaints and the renewal of Offschool are ongoing projects, designed to foster collaboration with institutions and encourage them to experiment with new practices. These initiatives aim to bridge the gap between inquiry and action, translating the principles explored throughout this research into experimental approaches that challenge conventional educational structures.

The question persists: can institutions be transformed to become more conscious of the challenges they face and the critical roles they play? As Agathe Boulanger, Signe Frederiksen, and Jules Lagrange reflect in Ce que Laurence Rassel nous fait faire:[200]

> "How do we want to 'do' (*faire*)? In this book, it is often about 'doing together' (*faire ensemble*) and 'being part of' (*faire partie*). Organizing collectively, among individuals but also in connection with institutions, necessarily requires addressing broader organizational, ethical, social, and political questions. During our conversations with Laurence, it seemed to us that a healthy institution is one where dialogue flows."[201]

Inspired by this perspective, this thesis aspires to contribute to these dialogues, encouraging institutions to engage in critical self-reflection and collective reinvention. By inviting them to participate in these experimental practices, we hope to spark meaningful conversations and catalyze a transformation toward institutions that are more aware, open, and engaged. It is through these shared dialogues and deliberate actions that the seeds of change can take root, fostering a more conscious and sustainable educational landscape. •

200 The curator and educator Laurence Rassel is currently the director of the École de Recherche Graphique (ERG) in Brussels.

201 Agathe Boulanger, Signe Frederiksen, and Jules Lagrange, *Ce Que Laurance Rassel Nous Fait Faire* (Paris: Paraguay, 2020). Trans. Lucrezia Russo

Appendix

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

N.B. For interviews conducted in French or Italian, all translations are by Lucrezia Russo.

DAN SHIFFMAN

Member of the Board of Directors of the Processing Foundation, Associate Arts Professor at the Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP)

26.01.2021

Lucrezia Russo: Recording now.

Dan Shiffman: Okay. So, to quickly answer that question, I am teaching The Nature of Code this spring, and I'm doing a few things differently than in the past since it's an NYU class. Most of it is remote due to the current situation. I've also been focusing on other topics like machine learning, data, and working with APIs. I could discuss those topics more if you're interested. Additionally, I'm always working on various iterations of an intro to coding class.

LR: Okay. Since your students are in the ITP master's program, what level of expertise do they have?

DS: That's a great question. ITP has really changed, especially in the last few years. The ITP department, a two-year master's program, now has an associated undergraduate degree called IMA (Interactive Media Arts), which shares the same space and teachers as ITP. There's also a new low residency program, a one-year master's designed to be entirely remote with a few intensive in-person sessions in the summer and January. Originally planned to start in Shanghai, it became fully remote due to COVID. I now teach both undergraduate and graduate classes. The students' backgrounds are quite varied, which is a big challenge.

LR: Even the undergraduate courses? How does it work within ITP?

DS: NYU is a huge institution with around 50,000 students. ITP is part of Tisch, the School of the Arts at NYU, which has both undergraduate and graduate programs. Initially, there was only a graduate program in interactive media, but now there's also an undergraduate program. The people and the physical space are the same for both programs.

LR: Interesting. I didn't know you were teaching undergraduates as well.

DS: Yes, that's brand new as of last year.

LR: And you're teaching the same topics, like introduction to coding?

DS: Yes, although for the undergraduate program, I've been teaching an introduction to machine learning for the arts course. This is a new endeavor for me over the past two years, integrating machine learning into the arts. Teaching this course has been a chance for me to learn the latest techniques and tools like TensorFlow, Google's open-source machine learning library. I've been working on ML5.js, a JavaScript library adjacent to the Processing Foundation. Teaching with these tools allows me to learn and improve them while enhancing the students' experience. It's not a solo job; many people contribute to the library, and teaching with it regularly helps propel it forward.

LR: That's exactly what I'm interested in. You and others are pioneering these methods, but how are they perceived by the institution? Many educators have innovative ideas and new teaching approaches, but it often seems driven by individual initiative. How does the institution recognize and support these efforts?

DS: It's tricky, and you're right. At NYU, faculty evaluation includes teaching, service, and professional practice since we're in an art school. For example, film department faculty are evaluated based on their filmmaking, the number of shows their work was exhibited in, or the awards they won. There's also some level of traditional publishing involved.
For me, my professional practice includes my work on The Coding Train video tutorials, contributions to ML5.js, involvement with the Processing Foundation, and mentoring for Google Summer of Code. It's hard to know how this works for everyone else, but I can reflect on why it works for me.
ITP is a place where such work is recognized. It probably helps that I'm a white male who has been around in this program for a long time and hold a privileged position. People often assume what I'm doing is important, so my work is recognized and validated.
I don't seem to face criticism regarding the appropriateness of my work output for an arts professor.
I advocate for more institutions to recognize and quantify work in open source, open education materials, community organizing, and building open-source communities as valid and valuable professional practice. It's important to recognize not just code contributions but also the invisible work of teaching, community building, and outreach. These efforts should also be validated as part of research and professional practice in open source.

LR: This is a tricky subject because validation often comes from exposure (i.e. on platforms like YouTube). My feeling is that the current response to the institutional closure has been to go independent. Many interesting independent projects exist, but students still value having a diploma. In my research on computational arts, I've found many exciting programs, but they often remain niche. You need motivation and sometimes privileges to pursue them. I'm interested in how we can change institutions. It seems that change happens when validated individuals decide to do things differently, rather than institutions seeking out these people.

DS: Right. That's a great point. The question is, when hiring, how do we evaluate someone whose primary work is in open source and community? It's an interesting question.

LR: Yes, and «open source» in a broad sense, not just pure FLOSS. I don't see my classes as my intellectual property; my syllabi and slides should be open. Institutions aren't always clear on this. For example, I saw a processing class syllabus from UCLA floating around online, but I'm not sure if all the institutions support such open publishing.

DS: I'm not sure how it's handled elsewhere. At ITP, there's a culture of openness. This semester, I'm trying NYU's new learning management system but embedding content from a GitHub repository. This ensures student privacy while keeping content accessible. It feels like a waste of time to lock materials into a proprietary format. It's easy for me to share because I have job security, but others might have different considerations.
I've intentionally maintained agency over my content and videos. Many faculty can't produce their own videos and rely on university resources, which then own those videos. This contrasts with textbooks, where professors use university resources but retain royalties. I'm lucky to have an established online presence, so I've carved out a separate space for my work. It's complicated, but it's important to have control and ownership over my content. It's more motivating and empowering when I can share and reuse my materials freely.

LR: It's also about the relevance of our work. We're not doing this for money; we believe in its importance. Good educators want to share their work without institutional constraints. However, institutions often aren't ready to support this openness.

DS: I agree. There's a fear that if educators share freely, they might undercut traditional educational models. But I think sharing content publicly can actually attract more interest in programs. Institutions might fear that sharing content would lead to fewer students enrolling, but I believe the opposite is true. Publicly sharing content can generate interest in enrolling in the program.

LR: Yes, some institutions aren't ready yet, and you're in a position where you can do things others can't. It's interesting to see the community grow, especially since it started in the U.S. and is now spreading globally, though it's different in other places. In Europe, there's still a lot of misunderstanding about open source and hacker culture. My research aims to support this community. I want to spread the word academically because there's so little written about this. Institutions listen to academic writing, so it's important to document the impact of this community on design in Europe. That's why I'm doing this.

DS: That makes a lot of sense. It's exciting to think about your work synthesizing these ideas and highlighting the historical moments and contributions of the community.

LR: That's what I want to do. As I'm in an unusual institution in Paris that offers an American diploma, and I come from Italy, I've been immersed in various educational cultures and I'm trying to connect the threads and piece together various insights. We haven't fully understood the impact of Processing.

DS: Your timing is good. This year is the 20th anniversary of Processing, so people will be reflecting on its impact. There will be a lot of reflection on its history. You should connect with Dorothy Santos, the director of the Processing Foundation. She's working on plans for the 20th anniversary and would be a good person for you to chat with. I can make that introduction.

LR: That would be great! Thank you for the introduction. I know you have to pick up your kids, so I don't want to take too much of your time. It was a pleasure talking to you.

DS: Wonderful. Thank you for taking the time as well. Keep me posted on your progress. I'd love to read your work when it's done.

LR: Thank you very much. Enjoy your day. •

BEN GAULON

Co-founder and Director of NØ SCHOOL

29.08.2024

Lucrezia Russo: How did the NØ SCHOOL edition go this summer?

Benjamin Gaulon: It went really well. We're in the fifth edition now, so it's getting easier every year. This time, we had a super interesting and diverse group: artists, professors, tech people, journalists—a real mix. They came from places like Korea, Ireland, Austria, Belgium, the U.S.—from both Los Angeles and New York. It was truly a fantastic group, 15 people, actually 16 this year.

LR: Do you have a limit for the number of participants?

BG: Yes, normally we cap it at 15, but this time we took 16 because someone got a scholarship. It's a good number. Anything more becomes tricky, partly because our space is small, but also because we invite participants to present their work in the evenings. We have something called the "No Return Festival" alongside NØ SCHOOL, which runs for the full 15 days, and then a big three-day event at the end called No Return.
Every evening, there are conferences, performances, and unexpected moments. For example, Owen (Moran, editor's note) came back for the second time this year to perform. The participants can present whatever they want—it could be their own work, a song, or group exercises that are a bit different. It depends on the profile of each person. For instance, we had an American participant based in Paris who's a psychologist, and she did a collective psychology exercise that was really interesting. We also had a content creator from Korea who sang.
Each evening, between three and four participants present something, on top of the invited guests. So, if we go over 16 people, it gets complicated because the nights would stretch out too long. This year, with 16, we were already at the max. To go beyond that, we'd need more than 15 days.

LR: How many guest speakers do you have? There are the 15 or 16 participants doing NØ SCHOOL, but how many external speakers do you add on top of that?

BG: Between NØ SCHOOL and the festival, we have about 15 or 16 guest speakers—so about the same number as participants. But during the 15 days of NØ SCHOOL, it's a bit less since many people come specifically for the festival. To give you an idea, on the first day, we had Philippine and Max, who run a place in Nevers called Terrains Communs. It's a communal space, a former vacant lot turned into a garden and a place for research and creation around ecology and the environment. We spent our first day there. The next day, I led a one-day workshop on planned obsolescence and obsolete objects.
We try to keep Wednesdays free, like a day off at school, because the days are really packed. It gives people a chance to take a break, or even think about some side projects or small ideas. That said, not many side projects have come to fruition because the program is so full that it's hard to find time for anything extra.
After that, we had Sarah Hennig-Palermo, an American who did a live coding session—that was on Thursday. On Friday, we had Jonah Marrs, another American artist based in Paris, who ran an electronics workshop. They created modules and circuits that output to VGA, allowing people to use old VGA screens.
By then, that was our fifth speaker for the week, plus the presentations every night.
The following Monday, we welcomed the BITNIK collective, who ran a full-day workshop. It was amazing. Their work focuses on what they call "Unreal Data," the layers of data that exist in public spaces—things like reviews and comments people leave on Google Maps about public places, such as churches or monuments. Their approach is to look at the worst ratings or reviews because, often, when you want to buy something, you check the worst reviews to get insights about the product or place. Even though it's not always accurate, it's usually angry people who leave reviews, so it's pretty interesting.
They explained that when people buy something, they often look at the worst reviews to better understand the product. It may not always be fair, but it's often the most frustrated people who leave comments. And in the case of public spaces, there's no real owner who can respond or get the comments removed. It leaves some strange reviews on churches, monuments, or public squares.
It was really interesting to see all of that.
So, they pre-printed photos of these locations on fabric, with the worst comments written over them, including the dates. Then,

we made signs like a sort of protest.
We walked through the city, standing in front of these buildings, holding the signs with the pictures and the comments. While we were there, they read the comments aloud, the ones left by other people about these places. It was pretty funny, especially when you come across comments like, “You can tell it’s a socialist city,” referring to the abstract stained-glass windows of the cathedral, which were made in the 1980s by a socialist mayor.
You could see the locals from Nevers stopping to try to figure out what was happening.
We filmed the whole thing with a body cam, and in the end, they edited a film from the performances, which was shown at the final exhibition. It was a really cool initiative from the BITNIK collective. Then, on Tuesday, it was Constanza Piña’s turn. She’s a Chilean artist, and she led an electronics workshop where the participants made sound circuits—you had to touch the circuits to produce sound. They had a lot of fun with it, and at the end, everything was set up for the final exhibition.
As for me, on Tuesday, I helped with an installation using obsolete devices connected together, which served as a base for a musical performance. I also took part in activating the installation, and it was great to see how it all came together. Later, we disassembled and reassembled everything for the final exhibition. Additionally, the electronic circuits created with Jonah were incorporated into an installation with a wall of screens. I had this idea in mind from the start, so we went to Emmaus to collect screens and built a wall using reclaimed materials, like plasterboard rails for the supports. It was really in the spirit of recycling.
Wednesday was another “off” day. Then, on Thursday, Ted Davis came in for a live coding session with P5 Live and other tools. They exported animation clips that we displayed on small screens I had gotten hold of. They were the ones from Nam, a former student. I bought them remotely, and my wife brought them down for us to set up. They were put to use very quickly, which was perfect.
By Friday, we were preparing and setting up the final exhibition. At the same time, we were preparing for a concert in the nearby church, with several performances, including one by Constanza. We also had Olivia Jack, who created the visual live coding tool Hydra, and the Cable Knit Sweater collective, featuring Sarah, one of our speakers, and David, a former NØ SCHOOL participant. For the past three years, they’ve been coming back to perform, and we’ve seen more and more people returning every year, either as speakers or participants. We had two locations for the exhibition: the gallery at Espace USANII and the Espace René Dumont , which is the local headquarters of Europe Écologie Les Verts in Nevers. The closing conference was held there on Saturday. It was a packed day, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., with talks and additional guests like Roos Groothuizen, a Dutch artist who works on critical technologies and surveillance. She talked about Amazon’s DoorCam, which are video doorbells. The issue with these DoorCams is that they constantly film the street, meaning Amazon has access to a continuous video feed of everything happening in the Netherlands. These devices are very popular, and since many homes there are at street level, entire areas are being filmed nonstop.
Next, Nicolas from Disnovation and the BITNIK collective gave a second, more general presentation about their work. Constanza shared stories from a trip she took across South America, where she visited various hackerspaces in several countries. Olivia Jack talked about her tool Hydra and what it’s like to develop a live coding tool. Ted Davis also spoke. Finally, Samir Sanders, an English artist, presented his work, which mixes live coding, rap, poetry, and spoken word.
After this full day of conferences, we returned to the CMI space for the exhibition opening and more performances. Samir performed, as well as several participants from NØ SCHOOL, including an artist from Los Angeles who works in tech but also makes music, and a young graduate from Dublin’s NCAD, where I used to teach. She created visuals using TouchDesigner, and they collaborated for a performance together, which became part of the closing event. The night ran late, and we even had an after-party at Vincent’s studio, a friend who’s part of the NØ SCHOOL team. His studio is beautiful—it used to be a workshop for sign painters and lettering artists, with a high ceiling and a garden in the back. There, we set up a projector, and Ted did some live coding. Nicolas from Disnovation, along with Doma from the BITNIK crew, did a music mix with a drummer. Dasha mixed too, and I did a little mixing myself. Some of the participants also joined in. It went on until 4 or 5 in the morning on Saturday night. By Sunday, we were all kind of winding down. We still had a few small performances in the gallery, but it’s always hard to stop. The end always feels a bit nostalgic, kind of like the end of summer camp.

LR: It’s intense!

BG: Yes, and people find it hard to leave. We also have a group chat on Signal, not Telegram, and the conversations kept going for days after the event. It’s a bit like the end of a summer camp—you find it hard to let go. Actually, tomorrow evening, Anna, one of the participants, is in Paris for her wedding, and she suggested we meet up. So, we’re going to get together with former participants and speakers, which is great. It shows that strong bonds are formed, and that’s really the goal: to build a community that lasts.

LR: I told you a bit about my thesis, at least the general ideas. I’m focusing a lot on the idea of community building. The title is *From Code to Commons*, and even before getting into the notion of “commoning,” it’s important to recognize that there are no “commons” without a community. Commons are a resource or something, but they’re used by a community, whether that community is small, large, or even as broad as humanity. And in this case, NØ SCHOOL could be an example of a community. What I’m interested in understanding is how the community around NØ SCHOOL is built. Is the ambition you had five years ago, when it started, still the same, or has it evolved? Is the original vision still aligned with what you see now?

BG: Yes, you’re right. What’s at the heart of NØ SCHOOL is the idea of a kind of richness that’s not economic or commercial. What we value is exchange, sharing, spending time together, and the importance of that. When I say “together,” I mean both the participants and the speakers, but also the people from Nevers, the regulars who come back and feel free to be themselves. For me, it’s crucial to create a “safe space,” a place that’s welcoming both physically and emotionally. I think this also ties into personal experiences, maybe traumas, where people need to feel safe somewhere to be themselves, to feel free to experiment without fear of being judged. That’s really important.
This year, I had some anxieties at the beginning. You never really know how the group will come together. For instance, one of the first people to sign up was a young architect from Tel Aviv, and another was an American psychologist working with associations that support Palestinian refugees. We wondered how it would go, but there were no problems. People who come to these kinds of events, at least to ours, have some idea of what we’re about and who we are, and they come with good intentions. On our end, we make sure it’s clear from the start: we’re here to support and help each other, to share and exchange.
I’ve also noticed that many participants are in a period of transition, self-reflection, or wanting to make a change. Sometimes it’s a kind of personal crisis, and other times it’s just a need to find oneself. There’s a therapeutic aspect to being part of a community. It’s a temporary bubble where people feel welcomed and open. And we try to ensure that this bubble is open, not isolated. That’s why including people from Nevers is part of what we aim to do, to maintain that balance. For example, on the Friday of the first week, I have a friend from Nevers who’s a musician and a design professor. He brought in an artist, Colombey, who does neo-new wave punk and describes himself as making “degenerate French chanson.” It was great, even though not everyone understood the lyrics, the intensity of the performance really landed. And it also helped bring some of the locals into our events. This is something I want to keep developing—getting more of the local community involved by organizing events as part of the NØ SCHOOL festival.

LR: So, the “off” is open to everyone, right?

BG: Yes, it’s open to everyone every evening. The conferences and performances are accessible from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. Some people just come for a drink, and at the same time, there are conferences, performances, etc. That’s what we call the “off.” It’s something we’ve been doing since the first year.
However, the workshops and the more “course-like” parts are reserved for participants. Because it’s really distracting to have people coming and going during a workshop. I once participated in a festival that did this, and while it was fun for the visitors, it was a nightmare for the workshop leaders. This was in Belgrade, where they had all the workshops happening at the same time in one big open space. It was awful—you had to almost shout to be heard. And for teaching coding in that environment, it was ridiculous. Here, we have a separate space, which works much better. The gallery is open all day, so people can drop by. This year, we’re also offering meals, which is really central to the community aspect. At least in France, as in many cultures, food plays a key role in bringing people together.

LR: So, you provide meals for both lunch and dinner?

BG: Yes, we even built a kitchen, and we have a chef—well, now there are two of them. One of them is Hacham’s husband, my associate. He studied culinary arts, worked in a Michelin-starred restaurant in Sweden, then moved to Paris where he worked in more relaxed, but still high-quality bistros. Now, he’s gone back to school and is studying sociology at Sciences Po. So, he’s a bit of an “intellectual chef,” as we often say. In addition to cooking, he also presented his work, particularly on immigration and the role of immigrants in kitchen labor. With a classmate from Sciences Po, they prepared our meals throughout the event.
We also offered, in a very limited capacity because we don’t have much space, the option for outside people to join us for dinner, but they had to reserve. Initially, we wanted to combine dinner with the conferences, but practically speaking, that didn’t work out very well. So, we decided to separate the two: we eat first, and then we hold the conferences.
A few people opted to come and eat with us over the 15 days. We’d set up in the gallery with little stools and camping tables, and then transition into the conferences afterward. It was really nice.

LR: And the space—it’s still not yours, right? I remember you had the ambition to buy a place. Is it still the same space?

BG: So, we’ve changed a few times. Our first space was a ceramic factory, which we unfortunately lost. Now, we’re in this gallery, called the USANII space, and it’s our third year here. But we’re not sure how long we’ll be able to stay because the owner noticed that things were going well and decided to raise the rent significantly.

LR: What kind of space is it, you said?

BG: It was an art gallery, but it had been closed for a long time. Before that, it was a shop that sold paintings, landscapes, that kind of thing. I knew the place from when I was a student. Then, an artist bought it and ran a gallery for about a year in 2015. We took it over after that, and we’ve been here for three summers now. We’ve had it since April 2015, but now the owner has decided to raise the rent so much that we’re basically being pushed out. So, we’re in the middle of figuring out what to do: should we try to buy the place, even though there’s no guarantee she’ll sell it to us? Or should we move again? That said, for me, NØ SCHOOL isn’t just about a location; it’s more of an idea, a community, like you said. It’s not the end of the world to move, it’s just that we were really well settled here. Everything was running smoothly, and the team has grown, so it’s nice to have a space that works well.
What’s important for me is that participants feel taken care of. We really try to simplify things for them: they come, they eat, they work, and they don’t have to worry about much. We think for them, so they can just focus on enjoying the event without having to deal with small details like cleaning or cooking.
I think that’s a big part of what makes NØ SCHOOL successful: creating a generous environment where everything is taken care of, so participants can relax and fully enjoy the experience. To me, that’s what it means to build a community: organizing the conditions, the space, the music, the atmosphere, while being very attentive to every detail. And that’s where it works well.

LR: Does NØ SCHOOL only take place for those two weeks in the summer, or do you organize other events in the winter?

BG: The problem in winter is heating and electricity—it’s tricky. But we are doing an artist residency in collaboration with other spaces. For example, we’re hosting a young artist from Dijon, who will go through several locations before exhibiting in Dijon, Besançon, and maybe even Mulhouse. We also participated in a project in the Netherlands called “Code,” which focuses on creating works around environmental issues and digital regulations, like artificial intelligence and surveillance. It’s a collaborative project with artists, developers, and people from the associative and political sectors. With Dasha, we acted as mentors for the artists involved in the project. In the future, if we can secure more European funding, we could consider hosting French artists as part of it, but for now, it’s mainly focused on Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands. We also want to organize exhibitions, but with the uncertainty around our current space, it’s hard to pour all our energy into it. For example, I’ve been thinking about doing a critical exhibition on artificial intelligence. Recently, I had discussions with some regional officials who told me that a lot of teachers and school principals are being encouraged to work on these topics, but they don’t really know much about them. I think we could organize a symposium and an exhibition to raise awareness among educators and the public about these issues, in Nevers, with conferences and open discussions.

LR: That sounds great! What you’re saying is true—NØ SCHOOL isn’t just a physical space, it’s a larger project. But I also get the sense that you’re very connected to Nevers. That strong tie to the territory seems like both a strength and a challenge, right?

BG: It’s true that we’ve organized things elsewhere, like an event in Nantes, or collaborations with Gaîté Lyrique in Paris. But in Nevers, we always try to create a strong link with the city and the region. It’s a region hit hard by rural depopulation, with significant socio-economic challenges: abandoned buildings collapsing, many closed shops, high youth unemployment, and people leaving.
For me, being from there, it’s important to do something for the region. Even a 15-day event like ours helps boost the local economy, even if it’s on a small scale. For example, we work with local producers for food. We buy our vegetables directly from a local organic farmer, and the meat comes from another local farmer. These small acts have a local economic impact. We also have participants coming from Switzerland, the Netherlands, and France, and they book hotels, which contributes to the local economy. And even though it’s on a small scale, it’s significant for a town like Nevers, which needs these kinds of initiatives.

LR: So, there’s a real local impact.

BG: Yes, and even though the city is culturally active, with music and art, there’s still a lot to be done. For example, we collaborated with a collective that organizes a festival in September around environmental issues and “punk gardens,” which they call “living commons.” We held our first workshop in their garden—no screens, no computers. They showed us textile printing techniques using beetroot and natural bio-methods. It was a way to explore post-digital approaches.

LR: In some ways, you were pioneers in this way of working. Now, we see more initiatives like

this, but I imagine five years ago, there wasn't as much conversation around these ideas.

BG: Yes, exactly. Twenty years ago, when I first started getting interested in electronic waste, no one was talking about it. Even today, it's still complicated because big tech events usually focus on impressing people and talk about innovation without really addressing critical issues like degrowth. The organizations funding these events often prefer you to talk about innovation rather than slowing down production. That's why we put the "NØ" in NØ SCHOOL. It's not about being against school, but rather against capitalism and individualism that push us toward a productivist mindset. We want to return to local values, with exchanges, sharing, and collaboration instead of competition. It's a societal model that has existed before, or still exists in other places, but it's something we've forgotten with neoliberal policies.

LR: And since you're talking about «NØ SCHOOL,» in my thesis, I'm focusing on the role of institutions, especially schools. What is your relationship with traditional education in this project?

BG: The NØ SCHOOL project was really a reaction to my experiences in the educational system, both public and private. I taught for years in the public system in Ireland without ever getting a stable contract. Then, the day I finally got a contract in a private school, I realized that wasn't the solution either.
The «NØ» in NØ SCHOOL isn't about being against learning or sharing knowledge, but rather about being against the type of school model we often see: hierarchical, rigid, and sometimes disconnected from the realities of digital art and technology. There are very few places where you can really explore the intersection of art and technology—unless maybe you're in a graphic design or interaction design program, but even that is often limited.
What I wanted with NØ SCHOOL was to create a space where people, after leaving school, could continue to exchange, share, and connect. Once you leave school, there aren't many places where you can talk about your work with others, except maybe in FabLabs or hackerspaces. But often, those spaces lack a critical dimension. That's why we talk about «critical making» at NØ SCHOOL: making things, but also reflecting on what we're making and why. At one point, I thought about going back to school to do a PhD, but I never got the funding. Then I realized that I didn't actually want to do a PhD—I just wanted that environment of exchange and community again. So, I decided to create it myself.
In Ireland, I had already tried something similar with a hacklab at a university. It was a sort of prototype for NØ SCHOOL. And when I came to Paris, while still working, I organized a festival with Dacha, who was a student at the time. NØ SCHOOL was born from this combination of workshops, conferences, and festivals.
When I first suggested the name «NØ SCHOOL,» my daughters, who were little at the time, loved it. And once I said it, I couldn't get rid of it. So, the name stuck!

LR: I find the project quite poetic. I also have another question about the idea of creating a «safe space.» We all have traumas, and for some people, a program like NØ SCHOOL might be intimidating. For example, despite my background in New Media, I often feel imposter syndrome. How do you handle this for those who might be interested but feel a bit intimidated, especially if they aren't very comfortable with technology?

BG: That's a great question. First of all, we always have direct conversations with anyone who's interested. We do video interviews where we explain the project and try to reassure them. It's something I learned from working in an American university—recruiting people through direct exchanges really helps. It personalizes the process. It's much harder to say no to a person after a real conversation than to an email.
Then, we always emphasize that our workshops are open to all levels. Those with more experience might go faster and even help others, while those with less experience will learn along the way. In any case, over the course of 15 days with one-day workshops, you're not going to become an expert coder, but you will discover new tools, new methods, and it's really more about collective learning. What we value is mutual learning. Everyone brings something to the table, whether it's technical skills or creative perspectives. We attract very different people, not all from the tech world. One year, we had someone who worked in a bookstore in Los Angeles, someone from finance, and so on. The point is to step out of individual competition.
We do a lot of group projects, like the exhibition, and everything is built collectively. We focus on the group dynamic rather than individual performance. The idea is also to demystify technology, to make it more accessible. Often, what seems complicated is really just an illusion. Once you open things up and take a closer look, it's much simpler.
In the first few years, we interviewed participants to get their feedback on the NØ SCHOOL experience. These testimonials were used to reassure and inspire future participants. If you go to the site, in the archives, you'll find videos where former participants talk about their experience. That's our way of using participants as ambassadors. Many new people come through recommendations from past participants, along with those who find us online. This year, for example, a participant from Korea found us just by searching «Southern School France Tech,» and NØ SCHOOL came up first. So, the SEO worked well! We already have people interested in next year's event. Some couldn't make it this year and are planning to come next year. Usually, by January, everything is booked up, so you have to be quick!

LR: That's incredible.

BG: Yeah, we're lucky to have European funding, which helps cover some of the costs. Now that we're part of a network, it also allows us to support people who don't necessarily have the financial means to participate.
In the past, we used to offer free spots when we needed to fill some gaps, and to ensure a certain diversity in terms of gender and identity among the participants. But now, that's less necessary because we get plenty of applicants from all over.
It's economically tough to offer a free spot for someone because the cost remains high. We provide three meals a day, plus accommodation, for about 2000 euros for 15 days. It's not that expensive considering everything that's included.

LR: You also provide the accommodation?

BG: Yes, it's separate, though, because we house people in student residences about 10 minutes away on foot. It's pretty basic—individual rooms with a bathroom and kitchenette, kind of like Crous housing. Since it's the summer, these residences are almost empty, so we make use of them. But we still run into small issues with local authorities, as it happens everywhere.
In Nevers, people can be a bit resistant to change. For instance, we had trouble finding a restaurant willing to prepare 20 pizzas for us in advance. People have their routines here, and any change can seem intrusive to them. It can be tricky to make things happen sometimes.

LR: One last question: What's next? You've been doing this for a while now. Do you ever feel a dip in energy? Are you thinking about expanding or doing something different?

BG: I don't feel the need to expand. As I mentioned, we've found a good balance in terms of time, space, and the number of participants. Going beyond that might disrupt the dynamic. What could grow is the festival at the end, but I want to keep the core of the project as it is.
If it ever became too easy, or if we felt like we were doing the same thing every year, I'd stop. That said, I've had this idea for a while of a «no degree»—something longer, combining in-person and online sessions. We could have sessions like NØ SCHOOL, maybe over a week or two, and create a platform with a catalog of guest lecturers that people could choose from. The challenge is finding the right economic model. I don't want it to turn into one of those expensive private schools that charge 30,000 euros a year. We need something sustainable, maybe a post-master's format where you could come for one to four years depending on your needs and projects, with support for both practical and theoretical research.
But I haven't figured out the right economic model yet—unless we manage to secure more European funding to make it nearly free. We're working on that, particularly through Erasmus+, in collaboration with universities in Ireland and Crete. If all goes well, we could host teachers and students in Nevers, and do the same in other countries.

LR: That's fantastic. Is there anything I didn't ask but that you'd really like to share?

BG: No, I think that's about it. As I mentioned earlier, what's really important is the team. I know there's always this idea that the person at the top does everything, but we have a whole team behind us, including two chefs handling the bar and general management. Adé and Xavier, who are a couple—Adé is doing a PhD in Geneva, and Xavier is about to start his PhD in sociology. She's doing hers in art history.
Then there's the daughter of a friend, who's still in high school but hoping to get into the school of her choice. She came to help us. And there's Vincent from Geneva. It's a great team, and the team dynamic plays a big role in the overall atmosphere. You have to be sure about the people you're going to spend 15 days with, especially when everyone's tired—you need to be able to get along without arguments. That's super important.

LR: That's wonderful. Thank you so much.

BG: You're welcome. See you soon. •

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Lucrezia Russo: You play a dual role as a teacher and researcher, and I know you're involved in initiatives related to the commons. So, my first question is about how your research on the commons intersects with your teaching practice. How do these two areas interact and feed into each other? To what extent does your research inform your teaching? I'm not very familiar with the school in Orléans, but I've seen that you've done some very interesting projects with your students, particularly at La Gaîté Lyrique. That intrigues me, and it's my first big question.

Sylvia Fredriksson: Before we begin, I also want to thank you for sharing your previous work, which I've had the chance to review.
It intersects with some aspects of what I'm doing in Orléans, so there are already some interesting connections.
To dive into your question, let me start by giving you some context. In my case, I believe my engagement with the commons, particularly from an activist perspective, and my teaching work have nourished each other in meaningful ways.
When I left Paris College of Art, I had a child, and although this is personal, it's relevant to the story. My child was born very prematurely, which led me to temporarily stop working to care for them. For several years, because I was working little or not at all, I became deeply involved in activist collectives—probably more than I would have if my life had followed a more "traditional" path. Between 2012 and 2014, I joined several groups focused on advocacy around the commons, particularly digital commons.
At the time, multiple groups were active, and the idea of the commons had regained prominence since the 2010s, especially following Elinor Ostrom's Nobel Prize. In France, this sparked a wave of interest in the commons, particularly in the digital sphere. One key association in this movement was VECAM, which focused on popular education about citizen-oriented Internet use. Between 2012 and 2015, they organized various events to bring stakeholders together around this theme.
It was during this period that I joined *Savoir commun*, a collective advocating for digital commons. This collective was largely driven by library professionals, including influential figures like blogger Lionel Morel. Simultaneously, another collective, Remix the Commons, worked on documenting urban commons. My involvement with digital commons allowed me to gradually expand my perspective to other areas of life, which became transformative for me.
Looking back, I realize how essential this transversal approach has been. For instance, focusing solely on digital commons can leave certain blind spots unexplored, such as ecological issues or the environmental impact of digital technologies, which only started gaining attention later. Applying the commons framework to other areas allows us to address these questions in a more holistic way.
Between 2012 and 2015, my activism was intense. This engagement eventually led to an opportunity at the Cité du Design in Saint-Étienne, where I was recruited as a researcher within their research department. At the time, the institution aimed to develop a forward-thinking approach to design, tackling future challenges. Although this research division was linked to the Saint-Étienne School of Art, it remained independent and addressed broad themes such as the Smart City and, more recently, the Anthropocene.
I was brought on to work on a program titled *Design des instances*, which focused on democratic issues, organizational structures, and governance models through the lens of design. I worked there for a little over three years. In 2017, during the Cité du Design Biennale, which centered on transformations in labor, I curated an exhibition on third spaces (*tiers-lieux*). This period of reflection on the commons was particularly enriching, as it encompassed topics like intellectual property, open source, the history of Fab Labs, territorial governance, and participatory democracy.
That moment was pivotal for me because it connected several key issues, and it marked the point where my activism began to intersect with institutional frameworks. This gave me the opportunity to conduct more in-depth research, and teaching naturally became an extension of this journey.
A few years later, I was recruited by ESAD Orléans under conditions similar to those at Saint-Étienne. Orléans wanted to politicize its focus areas around ecological issues and the commons. I was invited to design a program titled *Design des communs*, where I teach a specific course on this subject. Within this program, there are several more specialized

modules, but the question of the commons remains a strong focus and a defining orientation for the school. That is what led to my current position at Orléans.

LR: I had a quick question about the course "Design des communs." Is it a standalone program, or is it more of a thematic thread that runs through various programs and courses? How is it structured? Also, is there any documentation available on the website?

SF: That's an excellent question. To give you some context, the École d'Orléans is an art and design school with roots in the Beaux-Arts tradition, offering the standard curricula we're familiar with. It provides the equivalent of a bachelor's and a master's degree, with the *Diplôme National Supérieur d'Art* (DNA) in the third year and the *Diplôme National Supérieur d'Expression Plastique* (DNSEP) in the fifth year.
The school is organized around two main tracks: "Design des médias" and "Design des communs." The latter is essentially a rebranding of the former "Object-Space Design" program. The goal was to give the program a sharper focus by integrating ecological and social issues.
This change in name allows the program to align more specifically with contemporary challenges. Within these tracks, master's students follow standard curricula in either "Design des médias" or "Design des communs," but they also have the opportunity to choose a research program for specialization.
At the school, there are four research programs, two of which are integrated into the "Design des communs" track. These programs allow students to specialize as early as the master's level.
The first program, LIGA, focuses on the relationship between humans and non-human entities. Students explore topics such as the rights of natural environments, particularly the Loire River. This program addresses the connections between humans and their living environments, tackling ecological and environmental themes.
The second program, "Object, Craft, and Computation," examines the intersection of artisanal practices and digital computation. This is the program I work with. It revisits questions you've already studied in your work by exploring new modes of design that combine anthropological concerns related to craftsmanship with the impact of computation on how we conceive objects and forms.
It creates a rich space for rethinking design within both traditional and innovative contexts.

LR: That's very clear, thank you. I realized that in my long introductory email, I didn't really take the time to explain my research context since it didn't seem relevant at the time. But to clarify, my research particularly focuses on the notion of community. The commons encompass the complex issue of governance, but I aim to examine this problem on a smaller scale—that of an institution. I want to understand how a school, as an institution, can both create an internal, resilient, and participatory community that contributes to pedagogy, and interact with its territorial ecosystem—that is, the city and surrounding stakeholders.
At the same time, I am also reflecting on the concept of tiers-lieux (third places), which you mentioned in your work and which I find highly relevant. In my view, higher education institutions could play the role of third places—or at least integrate into third places—thereby breaking down the traditional separation between the institution and the rest of its ecosystem. This would create a more fluid dialogue between pedagogy and surrounding communities, which share common interests, particularly regarding ecological concerns that affect all of humanity.
On this topic, I'm not sure if you're familiar with Francesco Cingolani, who recently moved to Madrid to launch a large third place for the Fondation Carasso. I reconnected with him recently since it had been a while, and I wanted to understand how this space is structured. I find it very interesting in terms of imagining new ways not only to teach but also to transform institutions themselves.

SF: That's very clear, thank you for the details. It sparks a lot of thoughts, and I'd love to exchange ideas on several points. Feel free to guide me as needed. Mentioning Francesco Cingolani and third places immediately brought something to mind. Yesterday, I was contacted by the *Cité Anthropocène* in Lyon. Are you familiar with this organization?
They've invited me to participate in a residency they're organizing. They're in the process of creating an *École de l'Anthropocène*.
Initially, this was the *École Urbaine de Lyon*, a project launched by Michel Lussault, aimed at integrating ecological transition issues at the core of a new institution. For several years, this school trained doctoral students through various research programs. Unfortunately, it ceased operations last year for political reasons, which caused an uproar because it was such an innovative and necessary project, both in terms of its topics and its pedagogical ambition.
Now, they're restructuring in a new form. Starting this academic year, they're organizing four sessions focusing on governance, economic models, and audiences. I think this could also interest you, and the information I have on this could contribute to your reflections.
To return to your very specific questions, I'd like to share a few points from my experience. My main institution is the ÉSAD d'Orléans, but I also maintain connections with other institutions, some of which inspire me greatly. For example, the *Design pour l'Anthropocène* master's program led by Alexandre Monnin in Lyon has a unique and fascinating pedagogy, which I'll elaborate on.
However, before going further, I want to clarify that none of what I'm describing is idealized. Of course, we have high ambitions, but there's often a significant gap between what we envision as possible and what we actually manage to accomplish. That's why I approach this with realism, recognizing the obstacles and the things we can't always implement.

LR: I completely understand, believe me. That's an issue I face as well—the question of timelines, implementing projects, and especially ensuring their sustainability. We can discuss this in more detail later.

SF: Exactly. Regarding the concept of learning communities that you mentioned, I share the idea that a school isn't just a place for teaching and exchange—it's also a space embedded within a territory. A school must address local issues and integrate into its ecosystem. This is something we're striving to achieve at ÉSAD d'Orléans, particularly within the *Design des communs* track. While there's room for improvement, this approach was part of the initial vision.
It's important to remember that art and design schools, like the Beaux-Arts, are public institutions with a particular history. The ÉSAD d'Orléans is over 100 years old and began with a strong policy of amateur practices, offering courses not only to students but also to the city's residents. This may seem modest, but this tradition of amateur practices remains very strong in Orléans and maintains a direct link between the school and its inhabitants. In my view, it's now inconceivable to design an art school without incorporating these practices that democratize the issues we address.
Regarding the *Design des communs* program, we've structured two research tracks: LIGA, which examines relationships with non-human entities such as the Loire River, and OCC (Object, Craft, and Computation), which explores the interactions between craftsmanship and digital computation. Both programs are deeply rooted in the realities of the region.
For example, LIGA focuses on the rights of the Loire River, and we collaborate with several local organizations, such as Le Polo, a cultural center involved in urban planning issues. Le Polo recently established the "Parliaments of the Loire," and we conduct fieldwork related to the region. This reflects what *Design des communs* could be: understanding the territory, using investigative tools, and working with local actors.
As for OCC, the work around ceramics is rooted in the region's strong artisanal tradition. We've equipped the school with technologies like 3D printing and are exploring how to integrate these new tools with local craft practices. We send students to villages known for ceramics, and in return, they share what they've learned at the school with the artisans. It's about hybridizing practices, both within and outside the school.
This doesn't always work, as some of these traditions, like those related to ceramics, have long operated in closed circles. They've survived by protecting themselves. For example, when I suggested making kiln plans open-source, I was told it was naïve. The transmission of artisanal knowledge happens from master to apprentice, and it's not something easily shared in an open-source manner.

LR: It's interesting to learn all this. I also don't have many connections to certain fields of craftsmanship, and this would have surprised me as well. But I understand the desire for protection, especially around practices at risk of disappearing.

SF: Yes, it's about protection and also the continuity of a certain tradition. The transmission often happens orally, through direct experience. There's a shared lived experience, where you spend a week learning and passing it on to others. It's not just a file being shared—it's a human experience, a meeting. Looking back, it's amusing to see how naïve I was at the start with this well-intentioned idea of wanting to make everything open-source. I've revised my perspective a bit, but I still believe the plans should at least be shared.

LR: Maybe they'll eventually be convinced. It's also a matter of dialogue. I completely understand the importance of oral transmission. It's something that should be revalued, particularly in educational approaches. There's a certain poetry in this type of transmission, and we tend to sterilize it. As for me, I'm also an advocate for open source. I began my research on the commons through the Processing community. What you say about openness and transversality resonates a lot with my own reflections. I strongly believe in the importance of breaking out of silos and creating bridges.
That said, while digital commons are important, they have their limits. Too often, the focus is on the digital as if it were the solution to everything. But the digital is just a tool; the essence of the commons lies in information and knowledge. The digital exists to make this knowledge accessible, but it shouldn't be an end in itself. That's why this idea of oral transmission, tied to craftsmanship, seems very relevant to me, even if there can be friction in the methods of sharing.

SF: What you're saying is absolutely true. These things take time. In the first year, it's about getting to know each other, and often, it's only from the second year onward that you really start building something together. This, I think, is one of the valuable qualities of our school in Orléans: the ability to work over time. It allows for strong bonds to form, both with partners and with students.
When a student starts in their first year, you follow them for five years. That gives you the time to build something truly meaningful. It's one of the aspects I appreciate most about Orléans, and it encourages genuine mutual acculturation.
On another note, I wanted to share another experience related to the idea of communities and opening up a school to its environment. It's about the Design for the Anthropocene master's program in Lyon. Have you heard of it?

LR: No, not really.

SF: It's quite a unique master's program. It's run by a business school based in Clermont but is taught at Strate Lyon. It's something of an outlier, primarily developed by Alexandre Monnin, a philosopher specializing in the web. Over the past few years, he has published two books on ecological transition and what he calls negative commons.

LR: I haven't delved deeply into the concept of negative commons yet, but I recently discussed it with someone else. One of the people I plan to interview—who also happens to be a former professor and colleague of mine—is Benjamin Gaulon, the co-founder of NoSchool.

SF: Yes, I know Benjamin Gaulon well.

LR: I think Alexandre Monnin was with them this summer at NoSchool; we briefly touched on the topic. I still need to structure my exchange with Benjamin more formally. So far, we've only had informal conversations, but I plan to conduct a proper interview focusing on these questions of the commons.

SF: That's great; I'm glad you mentioned Benjamin. He's exactly the kind of connection that's relevant to this topic.
I've known Alexandre Monnin for several years and have followed his work. He comes from the world of the web and digital cultures, and he's brought a very unique perspective to ecological issues.
He's convinced that ecological questions shouldn't only address those already on board but also other actors who need to be made aware and guided through the transition. That's why he decided to focus on large companies—those struggling to envision their future.
Because, let's face it, many of these industries need to shut down to meet ecological imperatives. He asks the critical question: How do you envision the closure or reorientation of your company, knowing that continuing as you are is no longer viable?
He has worked with major companies like Michelin and even studied cases such as ski resorts and their snow cannons. He's explored various economic sectors to understand how these industries can evolve. This is what he discusses in his book *Héritage et fermeture*, where he addresses the need to stop producing negative commons and take responsibility for this reality. According to him, some large companies are, in a way, negative commons. At the same time, he decided to create an educational program to train young professionals to support these companies in their transition. This is how the Design for the Anthropocene master's program came to be. This program attracts students, at least 50% of whom are already well-established professionals like you and me, who want to reorient their careers toward ecological issues. These students are often between 40 and 50 years old, bringing with them varied expertise in fields such as public policy or business, which they now want to apply to ecological transition. The master's program is structured so that students take theoretical courses as well as engage in practical work. They respond to briefs from companies or associations that express a need for ecological redirection.
The internship lasts six months, during which the student helps the organization transition. To create this format, Alexandre drew inspiration from the New Patrons program initiated by the Fondation de France and François Hers.
The concept of New Patrons is based on the idea that commissions given to artists or designers are often poorly formulated. The role of the artist or designer is to reformulate the brief with the involved stakeholders. This program enabled diverse groups to become commissioners themselves, with the Fondation de France helping them refine their briefs. Alexandre adapted this concept to his master's program: the idea is to co-define the problems with the commissioners—whether they are companies, associations, or citizen groups. Half of the work lies in reformulating the briefs before even starting to work on solutions.
I find this extremely relevant, especially for us as designers who often work within project-driven logic. It flips the idea of the commission: Who initiates it, and how is it defined?

LR: I find this very interesting, especially because I believe there's also a pedagogical dimension that needs to be integrated into this approach. It's essential that companies are guided through this process of reorientation—not just with tools like "design thinking," but with a genuine education in the culture of change. This requires a long-term approach, and it's encouraging to see that this type of thinking is beginning to be incorporated into several schools. So this master's program is part of Strate Lyon, is that correct?

SF: Yes, that's right. The master's program is affiliated with Strate Lyon, but it's partially funded by a business school. It's a very specific

setup for this program, which makes it distinct from other programs offered at Strate.

LR: On a different note, I'm also interested in how students react and engage. As you mentioned, having a five-year program is fascinating—something not always available in shorter master's programs, especially in continuing education. Art and design schools in France have five-year programs without a break for a bachelor's degree after three years, allowing for long-term support. How do students engage? How does their approach to design evolve? Do they sometimes arrive without a clear idea of what design is, and does their perspective shift over time?

SF: To answer your question, without idealizing it, one of the very specific aspects of the school where I teach is the implementation of the research programs I mentioned earlier. These research programs dedicate one day a week to students, during which they work together on a collective project. There are no individual projects—everything is co-constructed, and assessment is based on the student's engagement within the collective.
The idea is to have them work within a real-world context, particularly through local partnerships. For instance, in the LIGA program, which focuses on the rights of the Loire River, students engage with regional actors. In the Object, Craft, and Computation program, the work revolves around hybridizing craftsmanship and digital computation, particularly in connection with the region's strong ceramic traditions.
In these programs, we have implemented an open source approach: every production is shared so that others can take it up, and the intellectual property of what is produced belongs to the collective. This truly shifts the students' perspective, moving them from an individual diploma-focused mindset to a collaborative logic. This model disrupts the myth of the solitary artist.
For example, when we received our first ceramic 3D printing machines, there was very little documentation available. We had to learn together, both professors and students, embracing failures, creating our own documentation, and modifying the machines. This process not only enabled technical empowerment but also enhanced the autonomy of our students. Some have now become far more skilled than us and are recognized at the European level. One of our former students, Emmanuel Hugnot, now designs 3D printing machines in collaboration with teams in Germany.
This collective learning process and the logic of peer-to-peer education among students have created a very positive dynamic. For instance, at the start of the academic year, we dedicate the entire month of September to collective research in the workshop, where students teach and train one another. This approach allows us to go beyond our own limitations as educators and serves as a powerful way to empower students and engage them in a collaborative mindset.

LR: Just to follow up on the topic of 3D ceramic printing, do you know Ianis Lallemand?

SF: Yes, I know him very well.

LR: I'm not sure if he works specifically with ceramics, but he has done extensive work on materiality and computational materiality.

SF: Absolutely. He's one of the key references for our students. He works with a robotic arm, and while our schools don't have exactly the same approach, their equipment is more advanced, and their level of expertise is perhaps higher in certain areas.

LR: What you mentioned about co-construction and shared learning, with professors and students working together on subjects that are not yet fully mastered, is really interesting. It breaks away from the traditional hierarchical model of teaching, creating genuine transversality.

SF: Exactly. But as you said, there are moments when circumstances force us into this co-learning approach, especially when no one is an expert on the subject. It's challenging to make this approach systematic because, in less technical contexts, there's usually someone with more knowledge than others. This makes implementing truly horizontal learning more complex.

LR: It's very complex, especially with younger students. They're used to sitting, listening, and not actively participating in their learning. Breaking this culture of passivity is crucial, particularly in France, where students are not accustomed to voicing their opinions. That's why time is essential in collaborative learning—it can't be implemented overnight.

SF: Yes, exactly. It takes time to establish this type of learning environment.

LR: I find all of this fascinating, and I'll try to find more documentation on what you've done with your students.

SF: I'll send you a link to a dedicated website. There's another aspect I haven't touched on yet but that might interest you regarding how students respond. These research programs have only been in place for four years, so it's relatively new. What we've observed is that some students have started presenting their final projects in pairs or groups. This required the institution to adapt, and I find it interesting because these collectives often continue working together after graduation. It helps to form future professional collectives starting from school.

LR: I think that's really the future of work. The market has completely changed, and it's become difficult to work alone. Collaboration, with diversified skills, is essential. It's yet another dimension of contemporary design. This has been truly insightful.

SF: Thank you—it's a pleasure to exchange ideas on these topics.

LR: I wasn't familiar with the *Design des communs* program, and I find it to be a really important approach, especially in France. You modestly say it's not groundbreaking, but in reality, there aren't many initiatives that explicitly carry this name yet.
It aligns well with what I'm trying to explore in my thesis. My interest initially centered on digital communities, but I'm trying to demonstrate how transversal this issue is. In design education, discussions around the commons are still quite rare. There are projects here and there, often led by committed individuals, but without a structured dialogue. We talk a lot about commons in the context of public interest, but I believe education also needs to be viewed through this lens.
This is the perspective I'm trying to explore—to expand the discussion on commons and public interest to design education because it's all interconnected.

SF: I can't wait to read your work! And before we wrap up, I'd like to give you one last reference—it would be a shame not to mention it. Are you familiar with Sophie Pène?

LR: Yes, I was supposed to meet her, but it didn't happen in the end.

SF: She initiated a project on design commons called *Métamorphose*. I attended an initial virtual meeting with people interested in the project. I also met her recently at ENSCI, and we discussed it a bit.

LR: Olivier Hirt had invited me to participate in *Métamorphose*. But for now, I'm involved in too many projects, and I've had to put that ambition aside. But it's always at the back of my mind. Are you still involved in *Métamorphose*?

SF: No, to reassure you, it's impossible to do everything given our current life circumstances. I found it interesting, and we discussed it, but I haven't had the time to get more involved. I'm still interested, but I haven't followed up.

LR: Same here. If I do get involved in *Métamorphose*, I'll let you know. I know other designers who are part of it. It's quite a fluid collective—people come and go. It's complicated for everyone. But I'll keep you updated.

SF: Yes, please do. Together, maybe we can help move things forward.

LR: Exactly, let's pool our resources. Thank you so much. It's been wonderful reconnecting with you after all these years and realizing that we're ultimately moving in the same direction. I hope we get the chance to see each other again soon. I'll share my research with you.

SF: Thank you—this exchange has been incredibly enriching for me. I'm excited to see where your work leads.

LR: Glad to hear it. See you soon, and best of luck with the new academic year! •

SÉBASTIEN SHULZ

Sociologist
Co-founder of *La Société des Communs*

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Lucrezia Russo : Thank you so much. To give you some context, I'm currently pursuing a master's degree at ENSCI called Sustainable Innovation by Design. I focus on educational issues within art and design schools because it's part of my profession. I'm a designer, but I'm also the chair of the communication design department at a private art and design school. In this context, I've been diving deep into these topics, following on from my previous master's degree, where I studied free open source culture and its impact on graphic design practices. Now, I'm extending this reflection to look at their influence and contribution within design education. This led me to draw a parallel between free open source culture and the concept of the commons, which is why I'd like to delve deeper into the notion of commons. That brings me to the interview you gave for OuiShare, where you briefly touched on the issue of education. As you mentioned, you're not an expert in education, but I'd like to better understand your perspective, particularly around the concept of "hybridization."
If we think of the commons as a third way, positioned between privatization and the State, could the idea of a "hybridization" between the State and the commons, or between the private sector and the commons, be seen as a fourth way? I'd like your opinion on this because, as a designer without a background in economics or sociology, I want to ensure I'm approaching this thoughtfully and seeking insights from those with more expertise.

Sébastien Shulz: Okay, if I understand correctly, your question revolves around this notion of hybridization and whether it could be considered a fourth way. Is that right?

LR: Yes, exactly. I'm not entirely sure if we can call it a fourth way, but it's something I'm exploring. In my research, I'm looking at educational institutions, particularly art and design schools, as well as several projects outside traditional institutions. These alternative projects sometimes position themselves in opposition to institutional systems, offering different teaching models. I'm trying to understand if it's possible to create some kind of hybrid between these two approaches.
If we consider educational institutions as representative of the State, I wonder if it's possible to imagine a hybrid between the State and a «non-state» model, similar to what happens within the framework of the commons. That's the reflection I'm currently engaged with.

SS: Okay, that's clearer now. So, where to begin? First, it's important to go back to definitions and clarify what we mean by the commons, the State, and institutions. You use the term «institution» to refer to public or state-run institutions, but in reality, institutions also exist within the commons and the market. For sociologists, an institution is essentially a set of formal or informal rules that guide individuals' behaviors. So, the commons have their own institutions. There are rules within the commons, just as there are rules in companies and in the State. What sets these entities apart is the nature of those rules and how they are decided and enforced.
In the case of the State, the rules are supposed to serve the public interest and are decided by an elected government, then implemented by a neutral administration. In the commons, however, the rules are established by those directly involved, who enforce them themselves. This is what we refer to as self-governance. In theory, this creates a potential tension between public institutions, which function hierarchically for the general interest, and institutions within the commons, which serve the collective interest of their members and operate autonomously.
When we talk about hybridization, what I explored in my thesis is how this tension can be managed or mitigated through hybrid organizational forms that attempt to combine these two systems.

LR: Do you think this hybridization could be considered a fourth way?

SS: That's a tough question. Personally, I'd say hybridization typically involves combining two existing elements. It creates something new, but I'm not sure if we can really call it a fourth way. It would be up to you to define that.
The issue with calling it a «fourth way» is that you'd need to define a new kind of institution that isn't public, isn't linked to the commons, and isn't private. This new institution would need its own decision-making and rule-enforcement mechanisms. But in hybridization, we combine two existing systems, so it remains an alternative to the three main structures:

the State, the private sector, and the commons. I'm not convinced we can call it a fourth way, but it's interesting to consider what exactly is being hybridized. For instance, is it the decision-making processes that are being hybridized, like in the management of a school? Is it the people applying the rules, those who are part of the community? In the State, these are public officials, who follow specific rules like public service law. In the commons, it's different, like on Wikipedia, where contributors follow rules specific to that commons.
There could also be hybridization in terms of ownership—private and public property, for example. Is there a hybrid relationship between the two? I think you need to clearly define what you mean by "design institution" and «commons» to understand what exactly is being hybridized between them. Is it governance methods? Ownership? Or the actual work of individuals participating in both systems?
For example, in one system you follow a hierarchy, while in the other you might have a more horizontal approach. It really depends on what you're trying to combine.

LR: Ah, that's really interesting. I feel we often face issues around definitions. At one point, I considered the idea of a "fourth way" in my writing, but I felt it wasn't quite heading in the right direction. I needed to better understand the concept of hybridization, as it often comes up in contemporary design practice.
That drew me toward this idea and got me thinking about how hybridization could apply to schools as well. I think there's something worth exploring for my thesis. But before going any further, I wanted to make sure I fully understood the concept without jumping to conclusions.

SS: Yes, you know, there's a whole body of literature on "hybrid institutions." There's even a Wikipedia page called "Hybrid Institutions and Governance." There's quite a bit of research on hybrid institutions. For example, you can see it in public-private partnerships. It's not fully market-driven, nor entirely public—it's a hybrid form.
In the literature, there are various ways of conceptualizing hybridization. I don't remember all of them precisely, but that could be useful for you. In your research, are you looking at an entire organization, like a school, being run as a commons? Or are you referring more to how resources are managed by different organizations?

LR: I'm mostly focused on the construction of the community. When I refer to the commons, it's about how the community is formed around the school.

SS: Got it, so you're talking about the community within the school. The community of people who use the resources. I see, so it's the school's internal community.

LR: When I speak of community, I am referring to both the school itself and its extension into the school-territory ecosystem. Starting from the premise that the commons consist of resources, the community, and the process of "communing"—the act of creating community. I draw on thinkers of the commons, such as Massimo De Angelis, for this analysis.
My focus is primarily on how to build resilient communities within schools, particularly in response to what I call the «crisis of art and design schools.» This is a complex concept, but one of the reasons for this crisis lies in the internal struggles of the communities within these schools. I am particularly focused on these issues.
What interests me is how certain so-called "alternative" schools, often inspired by communities rooted in the free open source culture, can serve as examples for more traditional art and design schools, whether public or private. There are many examples of such communities, especially in the United States, where they have succeeded in creating commons, even though the term «commons» is less frequently used due to its association with communism. Instead, they refer to the "free movement."
As you can see, my exploration is somewhat complex, but I am trying to understand how these models of open source communities can inspire art and design schools in the way they envision and build their communities.
It's not necessarily about changing the entire governance of the institution, but rather about exploring internal forms of governance that could be reconsidered. That's why I'm interested in the idea of hybridization: I don't believe the school's governance needs to be completely transformed, but there are internal spaces where alternative forms of governance could emerge.

SS: What you're saying reminds me of the distinction between self-management and a form of representative or participatory democracy when it comes to strategic decisions within a school. For example, to illustrate this, I'm part of a cooperative supermarket called La Louve.

LR: Oh, I know it very well! I know one of the founders.

SS: Indeed, there are two levels of decision-making at La Louve. On one hand, there are collective decisions about the supermarket's overarching directions, made during general assemblies. For instance, decisions like "Should we sell Coca-Cola or not?" These are decisions that affect the overall organization of the supermarket. But on the other hand, La Louve employs eight salaried workers who manage their daily tasks autonomously. It's not the members of the cooperative who dictate how they organize their daily work. These employees receive the general orientations but handle their day-to-day operations on their own. This shows two forms of democratization: one that concerns the major strategic decisions and another that involves self-management of daily activities.

LR: Yes, that's really interesting. I know La Louve well, though I'm not a member since I live too far away. But it's true that I hadn't considered this dual mode of decision-making. This is a dimension I'd like to explore further, particularly in connection with school management. I think this distinction could be interesting to propose.

SS: Exactly, and it's a good example of what Elinor Ostrom calls polycentrism. This concept applies here because it involves multiple layers of decision-making coexisting. These different levels are interconnected, sometimes with tensions between them. For example, the autonomy of employees might be limited by the strategic orientations decided in the general assembly. So, you have nested systems, and it's not total autonomy.
In the case of schools, as I mentioned in the OuiShare interview, the highest level remains the State. The question is whether the self-management of schools can take precedence over republican principles, such as equality.

LR: Yes, that's a very real question.

SS: There are indeed two schools of thought: the libertarians, who would say "yes," and the republicans or socialists, who would say "no." It's a normative choice, but this tension definitely exists.

LR: It's a complex question because there is indeed a risk of inequality if we were to allow the creation of schools entirely based on commons and territories. This could lead to imbalances. However, I'm specifically referring here to higher education in design, which is a slightly different context. I'm not talking about public schools in the strict sense.
Your points are very clear. And thank you for that interview (on OuiShare, Editor's note), it was really inspiring. I watched it a while ago, and while working on another topic, it resurfaced in my mind recently.

SS: I'm glad it resonated with you. And maybe this could help in your thinking: in this discussion about the hierarchy of strategic decisions versus self-management, in the context of a school, this could apply to both professors and even students. There's also the notion of experimentation to consider.

LR: Yes, exactly.

SS: It reminds me of a podcast I recently listened to about ecological planning, hosted by two French researchers, Razmig Keucheyan and Cédric Durand. They explained how general rules can be strategically decided by a representative government— in the context of a design school, this would correspond to the administration. However, there can also be local experiments where self-organization is left to students, professors, or staff members. These experiments might sometimes contradict the institution's general rules, but they're part of a process of experimentation. The idea is to test these alternatives and then evaluate if they work, to draw lessons for future strategic decisions. It creates a dialogue between local experiments and centralized decisions. I don't know if that resonates with you.

LR: It makes a lot of sense! Actually, I'm curious to know which podcast you're referring to because I've read *Techno-féodalisme* by Cédric Durand, which helped me a lot in my research. So I'd love to know more.

SS: They've been on several podcasts, but the one I listened to is called *C'est quoi le plan ?*. It's a podcast that explores leftist strategies, and in this episode, they discussed ecological planning. You can also find other talks by Cédric Durand and Razmig Keucheyan on YouTube, especially on the subject of experimentation. There are even reading summaries that could help you dive deeper into the topic.

LR: That's great! Thank you so much. I thought I was taking up too much of your time, but you seem to be quite comfortable.

SS: (Laughs) Yes, the weather is nice today at the Jardin des Plantes, so it's quite pleasant.

LR: Good thing it's not raining, or you might have been less patient! Thank you again, your references are truly valuable. They really help clarify my thoughts. I've started delving into the concept of commons, which is a new topic for me, even though I've worked in an art school for years and am a designer. But commons, it's a whole new field I've only recently begun studying, and there's so much to learn. I keep discovering new resources, but it's not always easy to navigate.

SS: Yes, especially since the literature on the commons is expanding quickly and sometimes moving in contradictory directions. Everyone seems to be claiming to be part of the commons today, but this can become unclear. For example, you mentioned the term «commoning,» but it's sometimes used in a rather vague way. It's important to really understand who's talking about what, and what form of commons is being referred to. That takes time.

LR: Exactly, and as a non-economist, some concepts are still quite vague for me. It would take months of work to fully grasp everything. The commons have become a vast and almost omnipresent topic, especially in the design field. But I'm not sure everyone is approaching this notion in a truly appropriate way. I'm trying to draw parallels, maybe a bit naively at times, but mostly to ask questions and challenge my own understanding. That's why I need to talk with people who are more specialized in these matters. Thanks again for your availability.

SS: My pleasure! I don't know if this would interest you, but I wrote an article in Public Administration Review called "Commonization of Public Goods and Services," where I try to explore a hybridization between commons and public services. It might help with your reflection.

LR: Oh yes, thank you, that's really interesting to me.

SS: If you can't find it, just let me know, and I'll send you the PDF. Good luck with your research, and don't hesitate to reach out if you have more questions.

LR: Thank you so much, really. Enjoy the sunshine!

SS: Yes, unfortunately, I'll have to get back to work soon. But thanks for this little sunny break.

LR: It was a pleasure. Thanks again, see you soon!

SS: See you soon, take care! •

SIMON D'HÉNIN

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05.07.2024

Lucrezia Russo: I'm interested in knowing more about the "student-centered pedagogy" initiative you're currently leading. Why this initiative now, and who is driving it? Is it a demand from the students, a necessity for the school to reconsider its stance, or does it stem from accreditation requirements? Why now?

Simon d'Hénin: Why now? Because it's always relevant! In the life of any institution, there are periods shaped by external factors like accreditation and evaluation. We are a public service institution tasked with education and research in design. The Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Industry and Economy provide funding for us to fulfill this mission. Since we are funded, there inevitably comes a time when we're evaluated on what we do and how we do it. In recent years, we've undergone several evaluation phases: an audit by the *Cour des Comptes*, a mission from the National Assembly on art school education, an internal audit from the Ministry of Culture concerning art and design schools and scaling issues, and the HCERES report from the High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education.
In the past, people joined to specialize in object design because, in 1982, the themes were more clearly defined—object design, scenography, interior architecture. Today, students are also interested in social design and public innovation. Several factors contribute to this. Each generation of young people has its own areas of interest and concern, and they want to focus on specific topics.
Overall, as we continually try to keep them at the forefront of various fields, they pull us into territories we hadn't necessarily planned to explore. We're always walking a fine line

between tradition and modernity. On the one hand, it's reassuring to have expertise in areas we know and master. On the other hand, the world of design evolves, students' expectations shift, and they no longer enroll in school for the same reasons. Therefore, we must adapt our educational offerings. While this primarily relates to subject matter, it also raises questions about pedagogical methods. When we talk about student-centered pedagogy, we're also asking how we organize ourselves pedagogically—especially as we introduce new topics like public policy design.
We're also facing a challenge: the aging of the institution. Some of our educators, who hold a wealth of knowledge and experience regarding the student-centered pedagogy we've practiced at ENSCI since the beginning, are nearing retirement. The major question is how to sustain a system that heavily relies on the transmission of experience and relational methods rather than written processes. When we examine the student-centered pedagogy embedded in the school's processes, we find that we've barely rewritten them since 1982.

LR: I was wondering if there have been any revisions. I've seen the 1982 texts, but has there been a re-edition since then?

SdH: Not really. There hasn't been much versioning or consistent updates. It's a bit like the U.S. Constitution—a foundational text that raises the question of how to interpret it at any given moment. That's what we do with the "Constitution" of ENSCI. It lays the groundwork, concepts that remain relevant for many topics. For instance, we didn't discuss service design back then, but we were already talking about the common good. This means that even with a logic of interpretation, the foundations allow us to tackle new subjects.
However, it's not just a theoretical question—it's about how we make it happen in practice. And that's where it becomes a real challenge. For example, when the school was founded in 1982, we designed objects, furniture, and similar items. Learning wood, metal, plastic, polymers, model-making, and so on was essential.
Today, we work extensively with virtual reality, augmented reality, and more. Do we create a new studio for that? We established the Media Lab, but that raises questions: What space should it occupy? How do we manage it? How does it integrate with the rest?
In the long term, will some studios disappear, or are we always expanding? Because we can't perpetually grow, especially if the number of students doesn't increase proportionally.
We constantly rely on more people to teach, serve as resources, or act as mentors. That's great, but financially, it's not sustainable. We need to justify and find new ways of funding. If, for example, we one day turn to MOOCs, does it make sense to move toward teaching without in-person interaction? Or to share resources with other schools, allowing our students to train elsewhere? Why not? They could go to Gobelins for virtual reality. But then, how do we ensure that the pedagogy aligns with our values? How do we make sure that when they return, they're not out of sync with what we do here?
Today, our situation is different from 40 years ago, when we thought people could come to the school like they would to a train station. People came and went, stayed for two hours or ten years, depending on the topics and expertise required. Now, the school is saturated. There's something happening every single day. In terms of space and time, there's no room to add new things, even though there's a demand to continue developing new dimensions at the school.

LR: And where does the demand come from?

SdH: It comes from both partners and students. Take biomimicry as an example. Initially, it was a diploma project, which then became a studio, then a course, and now it's a master's program. There comes a point when you can multiply offerings. We're growing, but growth, like that of a coral reef, doesn't happen at a constant volume—you expand by colonizing what's around you. The current path seems to be about returning to the idea of sending our students elsewhere to learn certain things. This allows us to continue benefiting from external expertise and to build alliances and connections with specialists in other fields: academic partners, studios, and professionals who host students. But it raises questions, for instance, about apprenticeships. Fundamentally, apprenticeships also mean figuring out how to delegate part of the training to an external actor.

LR: Yes, but that's central too, because there's a challenge related to changes in the job market. When I graduated—some time ago—it was understood that graduates were still in training. You would join a studio as an apprentice. That's less possible now because there's a demand for graduates who are already fully operational. Apprenticeships are a topic we often discuss, as professionals complain that students aren't prepared, which I find absurd. That was a bit of a tangent, but I find this question of apprenticeships very interesting.

SdH: So, we're being asked to move towards apprenticeships, for economic reasons, space limitations at the school, and the need to accommodate more students with greater social diversity. But this also means delegating part of the training to an external actor.
That presents a problem with accreditation, for example. We haven't yet fully measured the impact of this, when you consider the regulations and obligations around tracking students. Internally, I don't think we've fully evaluated the impact this delegation might have on our activities. It requires significant oversight: monitoring the partner, ensuring the quality of training, and the reality of the apprentice's assignments within the host company.
Currently, we let students go on internships, they return in the final days, and we're happy if it all went well. Often, no visits are even made to the host company. This wouldn't be feasible within an apprenticeship framework. We don't have the culture for that. Implementing a student-centered pedagogy alongside an apprenticeship model—what does that mean? What do we do? Because it involves handing over the student to someone else, whom you can't necessarily ask to change their working methods. How do you support this to ensure the training and pedagogical approach remain consistent with what you've decided? It's very complicated but also exciting.
So, why this initiative? Because today, we feel constrained to accommodate students with limited resources while enabling them to learn in a professional and paid environment—something we're not able to offer ourselves. We can't pay our students. We're not like the École Normale Supérieure, which can remunerate students who later become civil servants. Perhaps that's a path we should have explored: negotiating to train public service designers, much like ENS trains students for academia and research. Designers would take on public sector roles. That's another model, but we haven't gone down that route—for now. We're searching for models, but each time we add a discipline, a dimension, or an economic model, it strains the principle of individualized curricula and student-centered pedagogy. If you're unaware of that, you make choices simply because you want things to happen. We're all a bit in project mode, so we make concessions. But the problem with too many concessions is like the parable of the shrinking leather: pull in too many directions, and it thins out.
The risk we see is losing sight of why we do things and why we do them in a certain way. It's complicated because it requires everyone to understand the pedagogical ambition: staff, faculty, and students. It's a marriage, a meeting. We can do this. You, as students, can confront it and bring something to the table. It's a mutual contribution we expect from the interaction with students. But today, I'm not sure it's entirely clear to every applicant to the school.

LR: Was it clearer at another point in history? I've seen the contract, so I know there's a signed agreement.

SdH: That type of contract no longer exists. That clear collaboration has disappeared.

LR: There was also a mandatory three-week internship each year within the school, unpaid. I imagine that's no longer the case. I was wondering exactly when that shift happened.

SdH: Some things have been lost over time, sometimes for good reasons, and other times simply because they became too complicated to organize or we lacked the time. That's where ambition comes into play. The school is a design project that has unfolded over 40 years so far. A design project means encountering difficulties. When you're managing projects as a designer, you face challenges.
For example, you might have expected a supplier to have a specific machine, but they don't. So, they can't produce the piece as you designed it, and you're forced to find another way. You have plenty of options: you can compromise and say, "Okay, we'll do it this way." It might be less precise, less attractive, not the right material, but it's doable. Or, you redesign the piece, find alternative funding to buy the necessary machine, switch suppliers or materials, or subcontract. There are many ways to handle obstacles.
The challenge with the pedagogical program is also figuring out how to avoid making only compromises. With the increasing financial constraints on the school, combined with expectations for inclusivity, diversity, and addressing a broader range of topics, there was a golden age when the school could address all desired topics without financial concerns.

LR: When was that golden age?

SdH: Up until the mid-90s, roughly. At that time, you could hire highly qualified people, sometimes even poaching them from the advertising sector, because the goal was to build up the school's expertise. Salaries were comparable to those in the private sector. That's no longer the case today. Even just that has changed, and it means you can't recruit the same profiles anymore.
So, why this initiative? Because we need to inject creativity, to ask how we can maintain our ability to address the subjects we want, to explore topics we're interested in, while dealing with budgetary and other constraints. We are constantly walking a fine line.

LR: I have a few questions about the methodology and timeline of this initiative. I imagine it's very complicated to carry out this kind of project with the students since, I admit, I'm the first to struggle to make it to meetings. How do you manage to do this? And my second question: do you have a defined timeline, a conclusion date, perhaps tied to a deadline for an accreditation file?

SdH: We don't have an external deadline. The administration would have liked this to be completed by the start of the 2024 academic year. I told them right away that was a dream. Even in the best-case scenario, it won't happen. I estimate that if we manage to do this over the 2024-2025 academic year, that would be great. Some things have already begun, but the reality is that the school often feels like a train station. We have 99 staff members representing 66 full-time equivalents, so nearly everyone here works part-time. Add to that remote work, and the fact that it's crucial to involve the students—many of whom also spend limited time at the school. Just finding a time to meet is already a challenge.

LR: I completely understand.

SdH: So, you think, "Alright." Since we've raised the question of collegiality and collaborative work, I'm resisting the temptation some people at the school have to say, "I'll draft something on my own, then submit it to you, and if you disagree, you can tell me." But that's never how we've worked. That approach doesn't include students in the discussion—it's just an easier way out.
We started this four months ago, and apart from trying to meet once, nothing substantial has really happened. I'll be seeing all the staff on Tuesday at the summer seminar. I managed to get this topic onto the agenda, so everyone will be invited to start discussing these issues, though students won't be present. I figured it's better than nothing; we'll start there and see how it evolves.

LR: And what exactly are the objectives? Are you aiming for a document, a new contract, or something else?

SdH: That was one of the first things we needed to discuss. Questions like evaluation, how to support students in an individualized curriculum, and the positioning of the diploma phase. What do we expect from the diploma phase today? What skills and knowledge should students demonstrate in that phase? Is it truly a diploma phase, or is it more like a pre-thesis or a residency? None of that is clear.
These questions emerged from interviews I conducted with more than 40 people out of the 99 staff members. I carried out individual interviews as well as small-group discussions. Methodologically, it's manageable since I was the one setting the pace. But now, I either need to be stricter and keep driving the pace myself, or it becomes extremely complicated because everyone always has a valid reason not to be available: "I can't make it because of this, but I'd love to be involved, so find another date." The result is that nothing gets done. There's no obligation—it's a self-initiated effort. We could decide not to prioritize it, keep going as we are, and just wait until something breaks. But that's not an option I find appealing.

LR: No, and it seems clear that there are questions that need addressing, given the current crisis in higher education for design. Whether private or public, for different reasons, there's always this economic challenge. Schools are struggling to survive. And there's also friction between the institution and the expectations or needs of the students.

SdH: Those are separate issues. But I generally find that friction healthy. I think it's good for students to push back against the institution—it's just my opinion. Though sometimes, I feel like a good strike would do us some good.
By that, I mean moments where we take the time to have discussions, realign our schedules, and break everyone out of their routine. These are moments when we can rebuild things, where elements fall back into place. If you wait for it to happen naturally and peacefully, you get the impression it never will. Whereas with a good strike, you shut the school down, focus on an initiative for 15 days, and something actually happens.

LR: I was kind of expecting that at some point, given the resignations and everything else going on. I thought, okay, if there's a full-scale halt, it could get interesting, but nothing happened, and I was a little disappointed.

SdH: Sometimes, it's in those moments that you actually achieve collective and collegial efforts. These moments are very difficult to foster within the school, except during agoras, strikes, or festive events when 100 people come together to share a meal.
And yet, our very mode of functioning relies on significant collegiality. Without it, there's no buy-in for the project.

LR: That leads me to another question. In my thesis, I've also discussed the concept of commons, of "sharing." From what you're telling me, fostering commons is one of the ambitions of ENSCI's pedagogical approach. It's not just about topics; it's also about methodology, co-construction, and participation in the educational project. How do you manage to integrate students into a pedagogical project so that they come to the school not just to receive, but also to contribute?

SdH: Physically, we don't always see them, but they contribute through peer learning. It's part of the school's DNA to learn from professionals. Moreover, the diversity we seek at admission—regarding profiles and skillsets—encourages students to learn from each other, complementing what the institution provides. That's always been the case. But this requires students to be present simultaneously because it doesn't work if they're not. That's why we organize students in project groups—specific cohorts working on the same project in the same place during a semester. We require them to be there at the same time. It's like the principle of Greek tragedy: unity of time, unity of place, unity of action. That structure enables storytelling, and that's what we try to recreate every semester, moving students based on the projects they're working on.

They could each have their own desk, but instead, we tell them: "You're working on the same project; you need to be in the same place at the same time." In the early 2000s, when personal computers became more widely available, you could do 3D modeling, graphic design, etc., from home. Why come to the school? Back then, we were already questioning the material workshops, but we reaffirmed what the school could offer students.
Sure, you can have a setup at home, but you probably don't have access to a 3D printer or a laser cutter. We provide resources at the school that students can't access elsewhere. We leverage that by saying, "Yes, you can work from home, but you can do better here."
This concept of commons is constantly in the background. From the first year, students participate in a collective workshop because we need them to spend time cooperating and completing projects together. It's important. We continuously work on this idea of commons. If, at midnight, you're preparing for a meeting the next day and all the workshop managers have gone home, there's likely someone among your 20 peers who can help you. It's about fostering relay systems, permanent learning, and creating multiple opportunities and methods of learning.
You might get stuck with one workshop designer, but the school provides many potential contacts. If you can't manage with one person, you'll find another route, someone else to assist you. That's okay. The key is to avoid being stuck, which often happens in other educational models.
At university, if you don't get along with your professor, the year can feel very long. Here, you reroute, find another way, or do something else—and we encourage that.
We also practice commons within the teaching collective. We regularly need to reinterpret and reaffirm what it means to work collectively, what we collectively believe in, even if we don't all approach it the same way.

LR: As a teaching collective?

SdH: Yes, because it works. But is this ambition still shared? It worked for a long time, but now we face the challenge of an aging staff. People who upheld these practices for 30 years are being replaced by others who, even if they adhere to the pedagogical project, don't interpret it the same way as their predecessors. This leads to a gradual questioning of some of our foundational principles. For instance, non-teaching staff used to willingly participate in students' projects. Those individuals have retired and been replaced by others. You'll no longer see someone from the finance department modeling for a photo shoot, for example. It might seem trivial, but it's indicative of a shift. People say, "No, I'm an accountant, so I come, do my accounting, and leave."
At some point, I want to say, "But you're doing accounting at a school that upholds a shared pedagogical ambition, even in accounting." Being an accountant here means facilitating students' projects. We don't do accounting for accounting's sake; we do it to enable creation. The real question is: how do we sustain this dynamic?

LR: Who's leading this initiative? Why are you the one handling this project?

SdH: Because the director asked me to. The reality is, she assigned me this task when things were on fire, so to speak. She temporarily removed me from managing the project workshops to focus on this, and since then, I've been handling one mission after another. I'm now a mission manager. It's something I care about personally because I'm very invested in pedagogy. I'm attached to this school, so I take on these tasks to ensure its pedagogical model continues. That said, it's also a thankless job.

LR: I can imagine. I understand the thankless side, but it's brave. Honestly, I admire it—if I can be totally sincere.

SdH: I do it because I believe in this school's pedagogical model. A former student once asked me why I do this. I do it because I believe in profiles like yours. You came in with one goal, discovered other things along the way, started with the intention of designing objects, and ended up doing something completely different. You're not disappointed with where you are because this school enables that kind of journey. It helps almost all its students find their true calling. In most schools, you'll find the occasional person who started studying business but ended up doing something entirely different—maybe one in 300 per class. Here, I think all the students who come in leave with an ambition that's different from what they had when they started.
This ability to resonate with students' aspirations and guide them toward where they want to go—that's unique to the pedagogical model we have here. I came in with a background in mathematics and left as a pedagogue. I had given up on mathematics because I didn't want to be a teacher, and now I am one—but not in math. I found another way to teach. It's a small miracle to think that a gathering of people in one location in the middle of the 11th arrondissement enables 40 to 50 people a year to discover their vocation.

LR: Shouldn't that be the mission of all design schools?

SdH: Very few achieve it. It should be the mission, but when you see how hard it is for us... It's a delicate balance. Every semester, we have to ask ourselves what to keep, what to remove, and what to change.

LR: Walking a fine line—that seems inherent to this field. I'm not surprised the school feels like it's balancing on a tightrope. As educators, we're constantly navigating, which is exhausting because it's so difficult to maintain that balance. What surprises me is that places like ENSCI, which remain true to this pedagogy or try to, are so rare. It should be the norm, and yet we're amazed it still exists.

SdH: Yes. We fight to keep it alive.

LR: That's great. But are all institutions ready to take this on? I don't know if I'll ever answer this question. Should the fight be waged inside or outside the institution? As a teacher, it seems like the fight needs to happen both within and outside. That's what I'm trying to explore. There are interesting pedagogical projects outside institutions, which are valuable supports, but they can't replace the institutions themselves.

SdH: But they're probably more agile than we are. That's true. Okay, I need to go now.

LR: No problem. Thank you so much for your time.

SdH: My pleasure. •

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+
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Lucrezia Russo: What are the origins of Design X Commons?

Riccardo Balbo: The origins of Design X Commons can be traced back to four individuals: Elda (Scaramella), Carlotta (Crosera), Angela (Rui), and myself. This forms the core group behind the initiative.
This project stems from a discussion Elda and I initiated about transdisciplinarity five years ago, with additional contributions from Carlotta, who now oversees IED's offerings, and Angela, who is responsible for the MA segment at IED in Milan. As part of your research, besides interviewing Elda and me, you might want to interview Carlotta and Angela.

LR: I am delighted to do so. I will also contact them.
First of all, I want to ensure I understand that, besides the various courses you offer at IED, you have first-cycle programs, which are accredited undergraduate degrees; MAs whose accreditation status is unclear to me; and you have recently started launching two-year master's degrees—which I imagine correspond to MFAs—and are in the process of accreditation.

RB: In Italy, the educational system is structured as 3 + 2 + 3: Bachelor's degrees, Master's degrees, and PhDs. This system is divided into two tracks: the University track and the Arts track, which includes all design and fashion schools, conservatories, dance schools, and theater and drama schools. You need 180 credits for the bachelor's degree, 120 credits for the master's, and 180 for the PhD.
We have bachelor's degrees, which are called in Italy, for the moment, first-level academic.
Then we have second-level academic diplomas (DASL) worth 120 credits, which correspond to Master of Arts degrees. In Italy, these programs last four semesters, or two years.
This is the structure. At IED we have one accredited DASL and ten DASLs in the process of accreditation, which, as of now, have passed all the examination levels, and we are awaiting the accreditation decree. These are offered within the Design X Commons framework.
The programs result from applying Design X Commons to our four Italian cities: Turin, Milan, Florence, and Rome, and adapted to the four departmental areas of reference: Design, Fashion, Communication, and Visual Arts. This matrix has produced an initial package of ten programs, all of which have passed through the two agencies that conduct the screening before going to the Ministry for final approval. So, we will have bachelor's courses, then master's degrees, one-year non-recognized Masters, and a PhD.

LR: Regarding the concept of Design X Commons, which seems to be the umbrella for all the master's degrees, where did the desire to create this Design X Commons come from? Has this desire come not only from your research but also from a real demand from students and the market?

Elda Scaramella: Since our academic director arrived, we have tried to orient the overall training offer, observing what is happening in the world and capturing the changes in design and design education. Initially, we started questioning the role of design in relation to the complexity of the world, considering not only the technical or instrumental aspects of design but also its broader implications. Any design action, regardless of its nature, should impact the world, the planet, and all resources. This reflection led us to create a reinterpretative framework for the role of design.
From there, the idea of the first DASL was born: the first master's degree we proposed in Transdisciplinary Design. This concept aimed to address new paradigms of design in our field, considering the growing complexity, continuous transitions, and evolutions.
Initially, we linked this framework primarily to the theme of Global Goals. This led us to consider transdisciplinarity: the importance of viewing problems from multiple perspectives, expanding across various disciplines to correctly address contemporary complexity, and understanding the role of design within this complexity. We positioned design as a possible facilitator that brings together different approaches, enabling dialogue between various disciplines, and achieving a post-disciplinary level in an era of post-humanism, post-capitalism, and post-colonialism.
There is also a post-disciplinary theme, which is challenging to articulate: perhaps a unified method. We believe the experimental design dimension can facilitate creating an environment where these transformation processes can occur, enabling students to dialogue and facilitate the exchange and interconnection of different knowledge areas. Everything now depends on the ability to connect significant relationships that help us see what is happening with fresh eyes.

RB: This is the premise. It means shifting the focus from application to implications, from results to methods. The method is critical. There is a progressive blurring or weakening of the boundaries between disciplines and an interaction not only between disciplines but also within the educational structure among the subjects of the educational structure. Students and professors converge in a lab that is the core of the course, no longer focusing solely on project outcomes and divided disciplines, but becoming a complex microcosm where you don't see the boundaries. You first create this process artificially in a lab, then immerse yourself in contemporary issues with awareness and doubts, ready to request help if necessary. What I said at the beginning is also a political statement in a sense. Designers do not stand at the forefront telling us how to do things but take a step back and humbly coordinate this pool of contemporaneity. They are ready to capture interesting innovation signals due to their curiosity and ability to capture signals and combine them surprisingly. This political statement is causing quite a stir in the academic context, which exists and resists as it defends disciplinary boundaries. When you tell someone that architecture is not just about the architect, we are the carriers of a demolition in this sense. Perhaps the PhD we are launching will allow us to theorize our position. It is a philosophically and culturally post-modern position linked to Derrida's thinking. We are currently immersed in a demolition of disciplinary boundaries. Even if you cannot say this on the website where we have to sell our courses...

ES: We need to create a more structured research framework to better implement all these concepts. This research, done quite normally within the master's course we designed, connects to the concept of Design X Commons. It involves the informality of the transdisciplinary methodology that favors uncodified aspects from disciplines or methodologies. It is a methodological experimentation lab where the actors must be diverse, open to communities. In this lab, to tackle the complexity of the problem and make considerations that transcend disciplinary discourse, we must open up. The idea is to bring in communities, citizens, entities, partners, all actors who can converge on the

project equally, creating an informal lab that leads to a master's course with specific themes. The idea is to put this highly collaborative, participative, and relational approach into practice. When we met and reflected on how to design this course, Angela's work on Design X Commons intersected with our desire to explore these open, participatory methodologies. This generated our vision for the courses, our interpretative philosophy.

LR: There are educational or pedagogical projects outside academic institutions that have been going in this direction for years, and I am interested in understanding how they could work within an institution. You have highlighted important aspects, such as the informal lab concept, but at the same time, you are within an institution that needs accreditation and must offer credit-bearing courses. There is always this conflict.

RB: I'll give you a strong image.
Transdisciplinarity is somewhat mythologized today and trivialized in some aspects, but it is essentially the application of the complexity paradigm to disciplines. This awareness clashes with academia. Academia is based on disciplines, with a structure like Linnaeus: medicine, surgery, languages, microbiology. Complexity dismantles that. We find ourselves in delicate positions because we risk triggering self-demolition processes. We risk demolishing ourselves from within because we still have art and fashion schools, but we are moving toward a dimension where dividing by discipline is useless. It is ridiculous, but no one realizes it. It's ridiculous that we are recognized for a PhD in transdisciplinarity because it is an oxymoron.

LR: The paradox between the researchers' desire to dismantle the academic system while being inside an academic institution.

ES: IED has always been very borderline concerning traditional academia.
However, being borderline concerning the system and accreditation and always having connections with the productive and cultural context is a characteristic of IED schools in Italy and Spain. This guarantees the possibility of being halfway between academia and the outside world, what happens within our context. This is where our experimentation lies, in this role of intermediation and interconnection between these worlds. We need to translate this into research, not necessarily academic research. As a lab, this experimentation could lead to interesting results.

LR: From a governance perspective, I wonder if it is interesting to have, as Angela Rui says in the presentation video, student involvement in building the curriculum. Have already reflected on this from a master's governance perspective?

RB: We have a Master of Arts (MA) course in Turin that focuses on transdisciplinarity, in which we address the governance of courses. It would be beneficial for you to interview the coordinator of the Transdisciplinary Design program, who oversees the curriculum, as well as other key figures involved in the MA. While designing the curriculum, we conceptualized a theoretical governance structure, but its success or failure remains uncertain. You should inquire with them directly.
When we initiated the Design X Commons project, our starting point was transdisciplinarity, which we subsequently combined with other elements. Transdisciplinarity remains a central focus. However, several critical questions arise:
First, how do we integrate these concepts within disciplinary departments?
Second, how do we reconcile the high cultural and ethical demands with a school traditionally oriented towards practical skills, active and creative hands-on thinking, professional expertise, and industry relationships?
Third, what is the actual impact point for a poetic approach that diverges from luxury, well-being, and similar themes? One of Elda's reflections while drafting this framework involved a critical analysis of the Anthropocene and the Ecocene and their relationship with design, including human-centered and environmental design. For us, these concepts alone were not productive.
There must be a central focus ensuring that design is not self-serving but impactful. This impact cannot be limited to the environment, as humans are part of it, nor can it be solely for humans, considering the, for instance, the bees, the sea... To integrate these elements, a synthesis is required, which we define as the common good. The common good acknowledges and values someone or something I recognize value in. If I recognize value in the French people, they become part of the common good. This concept can also apply to darkness, dialects, or air quality. The common good refers to both the idea of good and community.
Community consists of individuals, and the relationship between society and the individual is significant. Good refers to value scales beyond just economic measures. We laid out the ingredients to condense the concept of communing, applying it to industries not as an endpoint but as a reflection platform.
The pedagogical mandate of the MAs is not to acquire professional skills but to develop critical competencies and visions, building on previously acquired professional skills. These critical competencies must be developed within a clear reference framework.
Transdisciplinarity is becoming central for us. If we take the example of Sustainable Fashion, it inherently demands transdisciplinary concepts; otherwise, it cannot be achieved. Yet, from a "label" perspective, it's challenging to communicate this concept into an established setting of a curriculum.

ES: There is also a more programmatic reason why we moved from "transdisciplinarity" to "commons"; we realized that no one understands «transdisciplinarity.»

LR: Do they understand "Design X Commons?" I wonder if "Design X Commons" is clearer or simpler than "Transdisciplinarity."

RB: I would really appreciate it if Elda, Carlotta, and maybe even Angela could interview you. I would love for you to clearly articulate everything you understood, didn't understand, think, or don't think about this whole "Design X Commons" concept based on what you found and what we are now sharing with you.

LR: You explain it very clearly.
What I can't understand is how this translates concretely into these labs. I would like to see how this vision is practically implemented in the labs a year from now. IED excels in communication compared to other schools; you have published a lot of interesting material. But when I look at all the interviews and programs, it's challenging to understand how some courses falling under "Design X Commons" are not just "regular" MAs.

ES: Projects will make the difference.

LR: Sure. And in my understanding, it also depends on who leads each MA. This vision needs to be embodied by the person coordinating the master and carried forward. Perhaps this is a discussion to revisit in a year when we see what happens within the master's programs. Since we teach critical thinking, students often question methodologies and pedagogy and then they criticize and highlight governance and didactic problems. It's an interesting (and exhausting) confrontation with, probably, no definitive answer, a perpetual work towards an infinite trajectory.

RB: Did the interview go well?

LR: Yes, it went very well. I hope it's just the beginning. I already have a lot of material on «Design X Commons,» but I'm thrilled to have the opportunity of interviewing Carlotta and Angela soon.
Thank you to you both.

RB: Goodbye, thanks.

ES: Goodbye. •

ANGELA RUI

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29.08.2024

Lucrezia Russo: After discussing with Riccardo Balbo and Elda Scaramella, I'm interested in ex the inquiry to you. Could you tell me about the methodology behind how this idea of commoning—this co-construction of teaching— and how it is being applied in the master's Design X Commons? I know the master's programs haven't started yet. If you can share the intention is enough for now, as I understand things are still evolving. Additionally, I'm curious about how the *Design X Commons* theme ties together these master's programs, which are different and situated in diverse territories. Each location must have its own specificities based on its context. I'd like to know how these different programs remain coherent with the pedagogical and design values that you've outlined. Those were the two key aspects I was hoping to delve into.

Angel Rui: That sounds great. I can give a broad overview, which encompasses the initial concept and how it translates into the educational offerings. At the moment, I'm primarily involved in developing the master's program, but I've been working closely with the entire team on what was initially just an idea, and has now become *Design X Commons*.

I would begin by explaining how this theme emerged. When I was asked to think about this kind of educational program, it was also a reflection of the environment in which we were immersed. When you are tasked with overseeing a project, ideas can often stem from what surrounds you. I don't know if you're familiar with my work. I've worked on design criticism and taught at various universities, including the Politecnico, and for seven years at the Design Academy Eindhoven, until I left last year.
My involvement stems from an investigation and observation of what's happening within schools. Oftentimes, we see educational programs that are fragmented, which makes it difficult to recognize what a school truly represents. You can observe the methodology or the type of approach a school has, but rarely you see a clear narrative that underscores its philosophy—especially in design, which at its core should have a social goal.
When we expanded from bachelor's programs to MA programs, there was a clear limitation: we couldn't create new courses with different names, like *Social Design* or *Environmental Design*. We needed to maintain continuity with existing programs like *Product Design*, *Visual Communication*, and *Interior Design*. So, I had to figure out how to connect the dots and build a shared foundation that would work across these different disciplines.

Last year, for example, we showcased young Italian designers, and I saw a wave of younger generations applying, which made me realize something: we can no longer approach design in a strictly disciplinary way. We highlighted three key qualities of successful projects: a systemic dimension, a relational dimension, and a regenerative one. Some of the most outstanding projects integrate all three aspects, because you can't really separate one from the other. You need to look at the practice of design prismatically.
From this, we observed that many designers no longer work in isolation; they form collectives, almost like schools of thought. Many have been disillusioned by politics and the traditional career pathways, so they're building independent careers in clusters. This is happening within the schools themselves, and we need to be attentive to these changes and ensure that our educational offerings evolve alongside them. It's not easy.

Another powerful theme we noticed is the importance of relationality—designers are no longer working alone, but forming communities and collectives. At the same time, there's the environmental aspect, which is always at the forefront. We tried to identify the positive aspects of these projects, which all stem from a context of crisis—be it political, environmental, or social. But rather than adopting a hyper-critical lens, we tried to understand the positive contributions these projects made.
From this emerged the idea of "the commons"—not just in the sense of shared resources, but how they are managed, protected, and how they develop their own identities. Many resources today don't have an established identity, so they aren't recognized or cared for. If you don't know a precise and situated context, it's hard to apply care to it.
We saw projects applied directly to communities, like those related to commoning. When we started thinking about the school, we realized that design should also be applied to understanding the commons, and especially oriented to commoning—the social practices of managing these resources. I am convinced that commoning is a total design process, and this needs to be recognized within design education. The challenge is that, while there's an immense body of sociological literature on commons, there's not much work being done in design that directly engages with it. There are some social experiments and social design workshop but there's little focus on integrating technical design knowledge with commons theory. I believe that applying technical skills in a pragmatic way can truly lead to change, whether the outcomes are products, common practices, or projects that a city council might adopt.

This is where methodology comes in—how designers approach their work needs to be elevated and recognized. It's crucial that we help students see the relevance of their work and push them beyond superficial projects. Often, we hear from mentors in schools saying, "There's no more real design, they just want to have group therapy sessions." But the real challenge is helping them apply their skills in a meaningful way. And then, if you look at contemporary art, there's this whole idea of conviviality that turns into a myriad of relational practices. You start to wonder: what is this whole movement? It doesn't seem to have a real foundation, and it ends up feeling quite ephemeral. As a designer, it's difficult to navigate this space of the ephemeral because, in essence, our role is also to contribute more concretely to this sociological transition.

From a methodological point of view, we need to think on many fronts. It's about how you interpret the work in front of you, how you engage with the students, and how the class itself becomes a community—not just mentors leading the group but recognizing that there are dynamics within the group that are difficult to overlook. If we can anticipate this a little, we can start teaching in a different way, deciding, for example, that we will only work on real-life cases. These are our ambitions.
At the moment, though, we don't have specific projects lined up that we can tell you about, like "We'll work with this company or that organization." We aren't at that point yet. We're still in the early stages, figuring things out. And I don't want to promise things that may not happen. However, there are intense discussions happening within the faculty about what the "Design X Commons" approach is and how to reflect it in teaching. For example, what we've asked of every course is that they don't become either purely theoretical or purely project-based with pre-defined briefs. Instead, since we're working within a master's context, research should never be an initial phase

followed by a separate project phase. These phases must be interwoven. Research should continuously inform the project, and the project should expand the research, and vice versa.

Another key aspect is that every course should be situated—that is, it should always include engagement with an external reality. This can be a company, but ideally, it should be neighborhood associations, cultural institutions, or social-oriented organizations, or even the municipality itself. We aim to build bridges with these entities to create opportunities for students to work within these contexts. This is part of the methodology that teaches students that it's no longer possible to work alone. The idea of the solitary designer working in isolation no longer applies when discussing commons and commoning.
The initial student cohort will be small, which is a great opportunity for us to test this methodology with a tight-knit group. They will form a community (hopefully, through collateral activities), and this community will expand as they engage in projects with external partners. They will learn how to adapt their language, how to conduct interviews, and how to communicate with people from very different backgrounds who may not understand anything about design. Moreover, the design context itself will not be fully defined by the students. The brief, too, becomes a part of the design process and must be developed in collaboration with a community. This is another core part of the methodology—there needs to be a constant exchange between students and external communities. And we want students to see that their project isn't something that ends after three or six months; instead, it's a seed that they plant, and they must continue caring for it, even if they move on to other things. Just like when you plant a tree, you can't simply abandon it once it's in the ground.
In this sense, what we aim to communicate is the idea of building a community within the class itself and fostering collaborations where students, not just mentors, engage with real-world issues. There's also work to be done on the mentors themselves.
I'll give you a concrete example. In one of my last years at the Design Academy, post-Covid, things had already changed. Deadlines were missed, projects fell apart. You would assign something, and the students would take everything very personally. I realized they needed a different kind of togetherness, so I made sure they didn't work on projects alone anymore. We built teams, and the more heterogeneous the teams, the better.
This goes back to the idea of Autonomous Design, as Arturo Escobar describes it. It's not about being an autonomous individual who does everything alone. It's about working within a community where each person has a specific role. It's the opposite of the Maoist idea where everyone does the same thing. Here, each person defines their role within the community, and that's what makes the group dynamic work. To facilitate this, I even started organizing breakfasts with the students. We would meet an hour before class, have breakfast together, and talk about more personal aspects of our lives. This allowed us to bring the emotional dimension, which is often excluded from class projects, into the process. When dealing with commoning, you need to apply technical knowledge to contribute to civil coexistence, to everyday life. The initial challenge will be to make the class behave like a real community, with defined roles and responsibilities.

LR: All of this is extremely interesting to me because, as I mentioned earlier, my focus is on the construction of a community—not only within the institution, within the school itself, but also in terms of the community's relationship with external systems, such as the surrounding territory. I believe it is essential to build the community first before addressing questions like *how* to teach within that community or *what* should be taught. This is one of the major challenges with all these new approaches, or future approaches, to education.
The difficulty arises in a world where we are facing an institutional crisis. As you mentioned, there are designers today who feel betrayed not only by the institution in general but also by the academic institution that grants them their diploma. There is this tension between the institution and the student, and I don't think it can be resolved with more diplomas or by constructing new buildings that seem to symbolize educational content. I'm convinced, particularly given my experience with recent generations—both pre- and post-Covid—that interpersonal relationships are fundamental to the construction of a course. The course content can remain the same, but the relationships within the course are what truly shape the learning experience.
Every year is different because the students are different, and you can't always approach them the same way. What might work very well one year, can completely fail the next because you haven't found the right connection or managed to build the group dynamic. So when you scale up from the course level to the institution level, it becomes incredibly complex, obviously.
That's what I'm here to research.

AR: It's definitely difficult, especially since I work in this hybrid dimension. I've thought to myself, Can we really work on a project in such a large school where all the functional areas are so separate? It feels strange to me because with every new project, I start from scratch with a new team. I have my role, but there's always someone responsible for the space design, someone designing the Visual identity, others supporting the research, etc., and everyone trust the process and know the way they can contribute to the project. And of course, if you let go, things come back together. The institution itself plays a role too. These are always large teams, and they always change. For me, it feels like every time a new, small community is formed where everyone has a specific role, and it moves forward, even in a very collective exchange. I must admit, though, it's challenging. The more institutionalized a situation becomes, the harder it is to change the rules of the game.
Right now, our advantage is that everything is starting on a small scale.

LR: Yes, it's a small scale, but at the same time, I was quite surprised by how many programs are being launched simultaneously. So, the challenge is in managing them—not for the students, but for the professors. It's the faculty that has to manage this more than the students themselves.
I'm also asking myself some sensitive questions here because these are the moments where discussions happen the most. But what interests me is how you create coherence in the process. As program managers, you have this holistic vision of what the values of these master's programs should be. But within an institution like the IED, which already has its own established dynamics and faculty who have been there for a long time, how do you maintain coherence?

AR: It's not easy. Building these things is quite challenging. Most of the faculty are new; some were already trained, and others were trained as we worked together. We managed to bring together the right people for this, but it's still a difficult task.
The fact that we had a letter of intent, which was then sent out to everyone, published, and explained, has helped. We had Massimo De Angelis come to give us a lecture, and now we're creating podcasts with all the staff. These efforts help ensure that these themes start to take root at the institutional level.
But with existing faculty, you always have people who are more suited to and sensitive to these topics, and others who are less so. There's a continuous effort that needs to be made. With the new faculty, I must say, we won't face the same issue, as many already work in this field. For instance, we have cross-disciplinary courses with Erika Petrillo, who will teach cultural anthropology.

LR: These were some of the questions I had in mind as a backup. Are there transversal courses, such as anthropology and sociology?

AR: Yes, there are. The idea is to have a teacher, starting from October, who will lead a course for all the students from the different master's programs in Milan. We did a significant amount of work on revising the brochures that had already been written, reformulating them.
This process involved all the course directors.

It was a considerable effort and, to be honest, exhausting, but no one pushed back. No one said, *This isn't my course*. On the contrary, everyone was happy because these are themes we engage with daily. We see them on TV, in the media; they're narratives that have become part of our thought process. We also often experience impostor syndrome, feeling like we aren't doing anything useful. So, when presented in this way, I think everyone was more than happy to adjust their curricula accordingly.

LR: Of course, especially considering that designers don't work alone, and professors, too, need the opportunity to collaborate with other faculties.

AR: Exactly. You might be interested in something quite basic, but we created a tool—a very simple Excel file—where all the mentors from the four master's programs starting in Milan, with some possibly not starting, have outlined their course descriptions. So, even if I teach interior design, I can see what is being taught in fashion, product design, and visual communication. This was very useful for us, because by looking at the full programs simultaneously, you begin to see connections. You think, *Oh, this could actually work well with that*, it's partially a curatorial process of imagining interesting matches
This opens up opportunities for cross-collaboration too. For the faculty, it also reinforces the idea that they belong to a much larger community than they might have imagined. No one is possessive of their work or hiding it from others, which we know can happen at universities. This has been a very straightforward and effective way to foster collaboration. It's small, simple things like this that have made everyone feel more comfortable.

LR: I hope this is just the beginning because, as you rightly said, things evolve through hands-on experience and become a part of the daily routine.

AR: Yes, definitely. And later, we'll also have a small final exhibition, which will not be strictly disciplinary. From the start, we will choose a theme that everyone can engage with in some way. The idea is to work together on a theme, and from that, we'll extract content that can be reinterpreted and presented. But when we showcase it, it will still align with the concept of Design X Commons.

LR: I just wanted to respond and expand a bit on this issue of temporality. Yesterday, I had another interview with a French educator and researcher who specializes in Commons and Commoning. She teaches at Saint-Étienne, where there is a very strong design school in France. They recently redefined what was previously called Product and Territory Design, or Product and Space Design. Now, they've renamed it Design des Commons.
We explored the concept of "temporality" as a key element in fostering critical thinking.
If we look also at ENSCI in Paris, their approach to education, especially in terms of temporality, is quite unique. Students stay for a minimum of five years, and most stay for six or seven years. This approach allows them to critically engage with their projects. By the time they write their theses at the end of their studies—which corresponds to a Master 2—the work is almost PhD-level in terms of depth and solidity. Plus, they take an interdisciplinary approach. There aren't traditional courses at ENSCI; instead, everything is structured around projects.
There really aren't any "courses" or "credits" in the traditional sense. Instead, students go through three phases, moving from one to the next until they reach the final phase.
But, of course, from an accreditation standpoint, it's complicated to be sustained.

AR: I'll show you the curriculum, but honestly, we could talk for hours about that. These are the issues I've been grappling with my entire career. In December, I was at RMIT in Melbourne, where I was invited to lead a Masterclass. The students were already on vacation, yet they still wanted to do the Masterclass—completely different from what we're used to, where students avoid summer sessions. What shocked me was that none of them had ever been in the same class as their peers because, from the first year, they could design their own curriculum. It's incredible.
I completed a PhD and had a booklet filled with 26 exams. I spent so much time at university taking exams that there was little time left for actual research. It's an outdated system that still persists. If we worked on curriculum and study plans, you would open the decree and realize it's from 2005, maybe even earlier.
So, the real challenge is trying to work from within and figure out how to innovate while meeting the accreditation standards. But once you get inside the system, you can start to make changes. For example, you could transform a traditional course into a workshop format, bringing in external guests, organizing study trips, and collaborating with courses that began a few months earlier. It's difficult to plan, but it's the only way forward.

LR: Yes, you have to work within an obsolete framework. My institution is American-accredited, which isn't any easier than an Italian accreditation. It's becoming more rigid every year, with precise lists of requirements. I tend to hire professors who are a bit unconventional, and while I provide them with the course structure, I also leave them some flexibility to adapt based on the group they're teaching.
But it's an ongoing struggle. That's why I'm exploring these issues in my research—how to change methodologies to make them more aligned with the approaches we see in independent schools and academies.
The real problem lies in the rigid academic accreditation system, And, even though there are cultural differences between institutions, the fundamental challenges are the same.

AR: Exactly. Lucrezia, this is a really important topic, and it needs to be readdressed. We need a new narrative around this. We're currently working on Design X Commons from within a private institution, and there are interesting opportunities, but challenges too.

LR: Yes, it's a valid question. At the same time, I work in a very private, very expensive institution like PCA. And while I haven't completely reconciled with this reality, I've come to accept that these students also have the right to learn, even if they're in a system that requires capital.

AR: Exactly. In the absence of adequate public funding for such projects, the best way to subvert the system is to use the available capital wisely. But it's not easy, especially at the societal level. For example, a teacher proposed a collaboration with a very strong association in Naples, but the association declined once they realized it was tied to IED.
There's also a need to reshape the narrative. Sometimes, when people from outside the institution don't understand the context, they say no because they think it's a commercial initiative. But in reality, we need to communicate that the world is interconnected. Whether it's the public sector or private entities, everyone is part of the same system. It's not about excluding one or the other, but understanding that both sectors have their roles. Private companies can be incredibly intelligent and driven, and there's a lot of intelligence in the private sector as well. The key is ensuring that this intelligence is directed toward a public purpose—toward the eco-social renewal we often talk about.

LR: Yes, exactly. But there's also another layer to this discussion. For example, ENSCI is a public school, but it only accepts 40 students per year. When we talk about inclusion and diversity, ENSCI is still quite an elite institution, like many design academies. So, while private schools have their limitations, the reality is more complex. Where do all those who can't access ENSCI go? So, it's not as simple as just labeling institutions as public or private.

AR: Exactly, it's much more complex, as you've said. In Italy, at least, there's often a kind of narrow-minded prejudice about this. People don't always understand the nuances. Just because students pay to attend a private institution doesn't mean you can't teach them valuable, ethical lessons. Our goal is to train people who are aware, critical, and capable

of navigating economic realities responsibly. We can't ignore the current dynamics of the economy, but within that context, we can encourage students to act more consciously and ethically.
So, in my opinion, the real issue isn't whether a school is private or public. I don't see a contradiction between being a private institution and addressing these important societal issues, especially when the institution's mission is aligned with those values.

LR: Yes, exactly. It's about maintaining coherence. When the institution itself is coherent—despite being private—it can foster a new critical perspective that might not have been part of its DNA years ago, but is now emerging as part of its evolving identity.

AR: Absolutely. Even if the school hasn't yet fully articulated this shift in a manifesto, the fact that we're engaging with social contexts, working on third-mission projects, collaborating with the community—not just local businesses but with the broader territory—speaks volumes. We're working with neighborhood associations and community groups, as I mentioned earlier. These are the kinds of projects we engage in, even with younger students. There's a lot happening on this front. I believe the school needs to have its own editorial tools as well. It has to clearly communicate what it does—how methodologies are changing, how practices are evolving. The way the school presents its work needs to reflect these shifts. Some of the student theses I've seen are really impressive, and that's what brought me closer to IED initially. I saw some truly remarkable work. There's still work to be done, though—both with the faculty and with the school itself. The question is how to use the right language when presenting the work, who decides which projects to highlight, and how to reframe and reprogram the narrative to reflect the school's evolving mission.
The academic board is also making steps in this direction. You can already see some small changes that make a difference. For example, they've now decided to include someone to focus specifically on critique and curatorship, to assist with internationalization projects and how we present and communicate them. That's something that's already starting to move things forward.

LR: When I came across Design X Commons I think there's a shift happening in terms of the language and narrative at IED. If we manage to reframe the narrative, it could be really powerful.
Thank you Angela.

AR: Thank you. •

EMANUELE SOLDINI

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04.09.2024

Lucrezia Russo: I'm conducting a series of interviews, and I've already spoken with Riccardo (Balbo) and others at the Istituto Europeo di Design (IED). I would like to briefly discuss with you the evolution of IED, beyond the Design X Commons program. We had an informal conversation when we met for coffee, but at the time, I didn't imagine I would use IED as a case study...

Emanuele Soldini: Remind me of the interesting things I said!

LR: We talked about the students and their evolution in contemporary society. In my research, I consulted the only available interview with Francesco Morelli from 2017, where he describes IED. He recalled that the school was founded with the goal of being innovative, useful to society, capable of educating students and future European citizens. According to Morelli, students haven't changed much over the years, but the tools they use have, such as new digital tools and the ease of connection thanks to new technologies. I'd like to know your perspective, given that you've followed IED's evolution over time. Morelli also emphasized that IED's central mission is to put the student at the center.

ES: Morelli was truly a character. He founded something unique. As you know, at that time in Italy, there were no structured design schools. There was the scuola Politecnica di Design, which was initially called the scuola di Novara and later moved to Milan, but it didn't offer university courses. It proposed two-year courses called "master" scuola di Novara programs and had a different approach, though not particularly innovative. However, it trained many highly capable people.
Then there was the experimental school in Venice, but it lasted only two or three years—I don't remember exactly. Aside from these, there wasn't much of significance.
Morelli had great foresight and proved to be very perceptive. Remember, he was only 24 years old. Despite knowing nothing about design and lacking a particular aesthetic sense, he had a clear vision. He understood that "design professions" would be the professions of the future, and it was worth investing in education in these sectors. So, he opened the school, and in these 58 years, we have remained fairly faithful to that model.
Of course, over time and with the changes that have occurred, the model has been adapted. Technology played a key role. When I joined, I was the first in the Milan office to buy a Mac. There wasn't a single computer in the school at the time. With the petty cash fund (which back then was called "small cash"—you'd go to the accountant and request the money), we managed to save enough to buy a used one. I remember they were the beige models with the small screen—I can't recall the name. There was practically a pilgrimage to my office to use it. Now it seems like a story from another era, but it wasn't that long ago.

LR: You say it wasn't that long ago, and I feel the same. Today, young people would say "back in the 1900s," but we're really talking about the '80s and early '90s.

ES: Exactly, the '80s. From then on, there was an incredible acceleration. When did you finish school?

LR: In '98.

ES: By '98 we already had computer labs.

LR: But in the first year, we didn't use computers. I remember it was forbidden.

ES: I think that was a positive thing, something we've lost sight of, but it remained a good practice. As for the students, I don't think they've stayed the same. Students have changed a lot, and it doesn't mean they're less smart or more intelligent. They simply change, and we grow older, so it becomes harder to understand each other. I believe this is something common to all generations—as time goes by, it becomes more difficult to relate to one another. I started running this place when I was 32, and now I'm twice that age, but students are still 18 or 19, so the gap grows quickly. The change is mostly in values: many things that were, and maybe still are, fundamental to me have no significance for them anymore. That seems to be the main point.
They have, I must say, a lower level of personal confidence, and we've seen an increase in psychological issues, especially after COVID. For example, we've opened an office dedicated to inclusion. In three or four years, we went from having about thirty cases of students with learning difficulties or minor dysfunctions affecting their academic path, to 357 cases just last year in Milan. We care because we're an inclusive school.

LR: How many students are there in total in Milan, just to get an idea of the proportion?

ES: Every year, we have about a thousand students enrolling in undergraduate courses in their first year.

LR: And where do you manage to fit them all? Sorry, that's a bit of an aside.

ES: We're not just in Via Scesa.

LR: No, I imagine not. I'm still thinking back to '98.

ES: A lot has changed. Back then, we were fortunately smaller. I say "fortunately" because as we grow, there are inevitable oversights. It becomes harder to respond quickly to student needs because you're no longer dealing with a small, manageable school but with a much larger entity. That's why the campus project is so crucial, as it will allow us to make a qualitative leap both in terms of size and available space.

LR: And when is the campus expected to open? I saw that the project is already under development in that area.

ES: I can't give you an exact date, because unfortunately, as is often the case, there are numerous hurdles to overcome, and we are struggling to move the project forward smoothly. If everything goes well, we should be able to open between 2026 and 2027, but construction hasn't started yet.
In terms of size, we will essentially double the available space, which will also allow for a change in the philosophy of how the site is managed. Currently, we mainly have classrooms with a few labs, but in the new campus, the labs will be central, with classrooms, both for theoretical and practical lessons, serving as support. One of the two renovated buildings, which is about 8,500 square meters, will be entirely dedicated to labs. In total, between the two renovated buildings and the new construction, we will have about 40,000 square meters available.

LR: So, does the change also affect the pedagogical approach, or is it simply an acknowledgment of the importance of labs compared to classrooms?

ES: The two things go hand in hand. We believe that in this digital age, the physical and material side of things—meaning practical knowledge related to one's profession—is essential. Therefore, labs are no longer conceived as course-specific labs, as they were in the past. Up until now, we talked about the «graphic design lab» or the «design lab,» associating the lab with a specific course or area. Each lab belonged to that area. But the concept has changed. In the new campus, labs will be organized by type of work, not by courses. Ideally, all students will have access to all types of work. Of course, said like that, it might sound almost impossible, because if you don't know how to use certain tools, you can't just expect to use them. For instance, if you don't know how to operate a band saw, you could really hurt yourself. There are limits and safety precautions, but the underlying idea is that the lab will be at the heart of the teaching. Furthermore, what we teach can also be delivered in other spaces, including common areas. The campus will have around 8,000 square meters of common spaces, which we completely lack today.

LR: There was the fourth-year room during my studies at IED.

ES: Yes, there was the fourth-year room. That was the only common space that lasted until shortly after your studies ended. Now, it has become a video lab and a computer lab, due to logistical needs. But that room was really a big advantage. Allowing students from different courses to work together on common projects is a huge opportunity. Often, they manage to go much further than we do. The campus project is essential for this very reason: it allows us to reorganize the school and make it function more effectively with a multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspective.

LR: It almost seems as if design schools are experiencing a sort of return to craftsmanship, a need to rediscover the physical dimension. This also harks back to a pedagogical approach from the '80s-'90s, which was more practice-based. Do you think this is a broader reflection on design pedagogy, on the role of materiality, and on how to recover it?

ES: I believe that materiality remains a fundamental issue and that there is a return to it. We are rediscovering and recovering methods and practices connected to this dimension. If you think about how English schools were structured, like Central Saint Martins, for example, they were built around the workshops. On the lower floors, there were all the heavy labs: lathes, presses, various machinery. Clearly, this subject contributes to redefining the pedagogical model. If you need to explain material technology to someone, you do it with the materials themselves, in the labs. If you do it theoretically, it's a completely different matter. The labs are not just for teaching; they also serve research. When you start working on a design project, you need to create models and test them. It can't all be digital, even though we live in an age of simulators. Of course, you can simulate many things, but in the end, you need to reach three-dimensionality, maybe even 3D printing, test the result, and then maybe go back. Not everything can be resolved digitally, at least not yet. With artificial intelligence, I don't know what will happen in the future, and I hope I won't be around to find out.

LR: I think you will be around, considering how fast everything is evolving. I sincerely wish that for you!

ES: Well, I believe we need to recover a way of designing, of thinking about the objects around us. It's essential to understand how an object is made, how it can be disassembled, how it can be repaired. This is particularly true for the design area workshops. As for the digital labs, we now tell students that from the first year, they need to have their own computer, which we specify, and they have to purchase it. Of course, we still have machines to support teaching, especially the highly advanced ones used for specific areas like Computer Generated Animation, but maintaining traditional labs with 24 machines for learning software has become a huge waste of resources and space. The problem with these computer labs is that they become spaces dedicated solely to that specific activity, and thus you lose the possibility of using the space for different activities, reducing the logistical capacity of the campus.
And to return to the question about the evolution of students, the world changes, and students adapt too. But I think it's mainly because of the evolution of society and the education they've received. Unfortunately, the new generations of parents are problematic. When we have open days, it's often the parents who show up, sometimes even without their children. For a few years now, we've started offering a specific program for parents, with people dedicated to managing them. At first, I didn't believe it, but then I understood it made sense. In my opinion, it's a sign that the issue isn't so much with the students, but with the parents. They tend to exert excessive control over 19-20-year-olds, even if it's probably with good intentions. And in Italy, which was already a country of «mammoni» (mama's boys), maybe this is more pronounced than in other countries. I'm not sure.

LR: I believe that there is indeed an issue related to the post-Covid era, a societal change with insecurities stemming from a very fragile political and economic situation. This leads me to wonder how a school is responding to these new students. I am interested in understanding how you are adapting, especially considering the growth you are experiencing.

ES: In our view, growth comes through foreign markets, both in Europe and beyond. We are currently working on a project in Portugal. We

are also considering a significant expansion in Asia, and we have some developments in the United States. I'm convinced that you can't do everything in Italy; here, the center has to remain, but growth needs to happen elsewhere. After all, today, we are already the only Italian design school with locations in three countries (Italy, Spain, and Brazil) and in 10 cities.
In Italy, further growth is challenging not only for economic reasons but also because we are facing a well-established demographic decline, and thus the market is shrinking. Also, steady growth can have side effects that may impact quality if you're not careful. It's crucial to maintain the core principles you set for "running a school." For example, if you grow in terms of students but don't have enough space, what do you do? You have to adapt by giving something up, and the risk is that you get used to no longer having those resources. This changes the way you teach and experience the school. We've been dealing with this issue for many years now. The idea of the campus was, for me, a mirage for a long time. Now, we are almost there. I believe the Ex Macello Campus project represents a turning point, one that will allow us to put some things back in place. Growth is important if the available infrastructure allows for it. A school that is oversized compared to the space available can make it difficult to maintain the same standards of service and quality.
Let me share a little anecdote: in the late 1980s, the design course was much smaller compared to other areas. At certain times, I would give students the keys, and they could work at night without specific safety protocols. We would check in at some point in the evening. Naturally, that would be unthinkable now, as the scale doesn't allow for it. The interesting thing is that all of this contributed to building the school's spirit and a sense of belonging. If you were to ask 15 people who studied during those years, they would have memorable recollections of their time here. If you asked the same question to someone who graduated in 2018, the answer would be different. Some are happy, others less so, but in any case, without the same enthusiasm.
Going back to those times is impossible, and it would be absurd, but we need to recreate "updated" and contemporary conditions that allow us to build meaningful relationships with the students. This is why the campus is so important.

LR: So, why expand abroad? It's a genuine question, not a critical one.

ES: Why expand? There are many reasons. For example, because IED is and wants to be an increasingly strong international network. It's a relevant topic. The cultural mix that comes from these initiatives is incredible, and it's real nourishment, especially for a design school.
If you want a more technical reason, but just as valid, it's because we need to find alternative ways to obtain the resources necessary to do everything we'd like to do. We don't receive public funding, so we finance ourselves entirely through student fees. Our budget is always under pressure, and like all businesses, even though we are a benefit company, we cut costs when possible to remain efficient. We are an expensive school, but the resources almost never allow us to do everything we want. For instance, paying teachers more, offering more merit-based scholarships, or providing more extracurricular activities.
In short, there are always three options: raise fees, lower costs, or invent new business opportunities by opening new activities. Raising fees penalizes a large number of students, cutting costs doesn't guarantee success, and opening new ventures in other markets presents a significant growth opportunity.

LR: I completely understand, it's the same problem I face in my own professional context.

ES: I can imagine; it's a very serious strategic issue. For instance, we have a joint venture with Portugal, and we hope it will bring in new resources. We have a large pool of Brazilian students in our São Paulo and Rio campuses, who could study in Portugal, and vice versa—Portuguese students could come here to Italy for professional Masters or specialist degrees. International activities are fundamental for a school like ours. And the only alternative would be to reduce the size of the campus, which sounds very backward. The risk is staying at a size that's neither here nor there. For us, medium-sized campuses work best historically—those with around 250-350 students in the first year. They're easier to manage, require less staff, less logistics, and you can still have high-level teachers in a balanced situation. But the main campus in Milan has always been the exception to that rule.

LR: And is there independence between the different campuses?

ES: Yes, there is a degree of independence, but there are also central services, like marketing, which is managed at a central level. The academic plans are also coordinated between the Academic Direction and the campuses because it's essential to have a group-wide approach. You have to do this if you want to be perceived as a single brand, a single school. Otherwise, you risk creating internal competition between campuses. In the past, the president believed that internal competition was the best way to grow, and this created constant conflicts. But times have changed, and now we work much more collaboratively between campuses. We could still do more, but there is already a lot of shared work with joint projects between different campuses.

LR: Do students move between campuses?

ES: Students move very little between campuses, for various reasons. In Italy, we only have one Ministry to refer to, so theoretically, moving between Italian campuses should be easy. But in practice, logistics complicate things: if a section is full, we can't accept a student from another city.
Additionally, the lack of facilities like student housing makes it difficult for a student to relocate temporarily, because they need to find accommodation. In Spain, there are three different systems (of accreditation) for each city (Madrid, Barcelona, and another in Bilbao), so moving between campuses there is also complicated. And let's not even talk about Brazil, which has a completely different system. Another issue is that we are not a recognized academy. We are a private institution. We can award first-level academic degrees, but we have to request recognition from the ministry for each course. We are not recognized as a single entity.

LR: In my research, I also analyze the relationship between schools and their surrounding territory. What is your relationship with the local area?

ES: We are very connected to the local area, and we have always emphasized this connection—it has been a fundamental part of our identity since the beginning. For example, the relationship with local businesses significantly influences the type of courses we offer and how we structure them. The courses we run in Madrid have a different focus compared to those we offer in Milan, and you can see that in the results. The expectations of students studying design in Milan are likely different from those in Cagliari, and this affects the projects we develop. This connection to the local area is also an important marketing tool. The people working in local companies often have families—children, grandchildren, or acquaintances—who could become our students. We have a dedicated Careers area and a Special Projects unit that works with local companies and organizations. Collaborating closely with businesses and local institutions is very important. The placement of graduates is a key factor for a school like this, and it is also a marketing asset.

LR: Thank you.
That's pretty much everything I wanted to know... •

LINDA JARVIN

President of Paris College of Art

08.07.2024

Lucrezia Russo: So, from the beginning, how did the MA Design for Social Impact (MDES) start? How did the collaboration begin with makesense?

Linda Jarvin: Do you want the truth?

LR: Yes, please. Just share what you feel comfortable having published.

LJ: Absolutely. I'll tell you the truth because it's what I tell candidates as well.
makesense is a French organization started by business school graduates in 2010[1].
Initially, makesense paired individuals with projects, serving as one of the first ways to do community service in France, a very well-established practice in the US, but that wasn't as common in France. That's how they began—pairing individuals, volunteers with various projects. Then, they started something called Sense School. One of the driving forces behind that was a woman named Marine Plossu[2].
Marine is no longer with makesense. I met her at a breakfast for professional women in Paris. We were sitting next to each other, discussing our interests. At that time, she had started Sense School while based in Dakar, Senegal. We realized that makesense had extensive experience in working with organizations and individuals on experiential learning projects. However, they didn't have the capacity to offer degrees or structure it into a formal academic program, whereas we had that capability.
So, we decided to join forces and create something very experiential, grounded in real-world problems, which we both valued. Initially, the degree was linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, but the accreditation agency refused that name so we changed it to the broader title Design for Social Impact.. This was back in 2015, if I recall correctly. The origin story is essentially about combining the experiential knowledge of makesense with the academic and theoretical education we could offer. The aim was to structure it as a master's degree, providing both experiential knowledge and theoretical foundations, teaching students how to research and write, among other academic skills. That's how it all started.

LR: Does Sense School still exist?

LJ: I don't know. makesense does many projects with other schools, but I'm not sure if they still call it Sense School. makesense has grown significantly, with branches in different countries. Now, Make Sense focuses on three main areas: pairing individuals with volunteer projects, working on governance to help companies create spaces for their employees to work on pro bono projects, similar to what Google has done for a long time, and educational goals, working with schools.

LR: So, it involves educational engineering?

LJ: Yes, basically.

LR: So, you started this with Marine?

LJ: Yes, we wrote the program together and then rewrote it when the accreditation agency didn't like the initial title and structure. From the beginning, the idea was to have classes offered by makesense collaborators, focusing on experiential learning. For example, there's a design thinking class where students implement the principles in collaboration with makesense projects. There's also a class on social entrepreneurship, pairing students with social startups being incubated that year. Another class on leadership skills is also taught by makesense. Students develop projects, make presentations, and engage with the makesense community.

LR: Is it still the case now?

LJ: Yes, although the content is changing somewhat this year, the idea remains that they engage in experiential learning with makesense.

LR: So, we have half of the classes taught by makesense?

LJ: In the first semester, three classes are taught by makesense [out of five, editor's note], and in the second semester, two classes, including their individual project and a class on governance, are also taught by someone from makesense.

LR: And physically, they are based here at Paris College of Art?

LJ: Yes, this is their base, though they also hold events and some classes at makesense. But primarily, this is their home base. For many classes, students go out to meet companies or work with social startups in different parts of Paris, but this is the main base.

LR: From what I understood from our meeting with makesense, there's an issue with language because we are in France and the students are international. How are you addressing this issue?

LJ: It's not problematic, but it requires adaptation with each new cohort of students. The staff at makesense speaks English, and most people at makesense, who are generally between 25 and 35 years old, speak English. However, many events are only in French. Sometimes we have students who speak French, and other years it's more challenging to find a perfect match. Pre-COVID, our students would also attend a Sense Camp, which is organized by makesense internationally and tends to be in English.

LR: Based on your experience with this partnership, what are the advantages of co-creating a program with an external organization?

LJ: I wouldn't call them external because we really created the program together.

LR: Yes, but externally, it's like an exogen in terms that it's not part of PCA. It's another structure. So, of course, it's a collaboration. But if we look at it in the perspective of being "inside a school," it's an external collaboration. Yeah, that's why I call it like this. I understand that it's a kind of paritetic collaboration.

LJ: Right. In my mind, the big difference is that we designed it together. So, it's not like we're subcontracting part of the education to someone else. It's really something we created together. And it wouldn't be the same program if we weren't doing it together.

LR: Absolutely. I wanted to understand how you perceive the advantages or the good side of doing this and how this could be just a good example of how you can co-create.

LJ: I believe co-creation is essential, and it's quite stimulating. It introduces more perspectives and brings in additional knowledge. Students benefit from everything we offer here, but they also gain from what makesense offers. Essentially, students enroll in one program but have access to two organizations and two networks, which expands their opportunities. However, like any

1 https://france.makesense.org/notre-projet/notre-histoire/#:~:text=makesense%20est%20n%C3%A9%20en%202010,leurs%20projets%2%C3%A9cologiques%20et%20sociaux%20%3F
2 https://senseschool.fr/lequipe-senseschool/

collaborative project, it requires more planning, discussions, and consensus-building. It's not as straightforward as a program managed entirely in-house, where everything is predefined—courses, teachers, and structure.

LR: This complexity is inherent in collaborations and co-building initiatives. Have you considered using this as a model to develop other similar projects?

LJ: I think we now have a blueprint for this kind of collaboration. While I haven't actively searched for other organizations that might be suitable, our extensive collaborations with other schools and higher education institutions offer different models. For instance, we have a joint degree with an American college, which is another form of collaboration. We've learned valuable lessons that would simplify the process if we decided to replicate it in another context. Comparing the co-creation and co-management of the BFA degree with Emerson College to the master's degree with makesense, the latter is easier due to fewer external constraints. makesense doesn't have to deal with accreditation or degree-granting authority from a French authority, which simplifies things. In contrast, the joint degree with Emerson requires navigating the accreditation and degree-granting requirements of both institutions.

LR: Which involve different accreditation standards.

LJ: Exactly. And Emerson is a large institution.

LR: I imagine you have some makesense people dedicated to MDES. I'd love to have a quick conversation with them.

LJ: Victor Senave is our main contact now.

LR: I'd love to talk to him to get his perspective on the project. I don't know how you feel about its success. I know there are ups and downs depending on how many students enroll...

LJ: Yes, I think it is successful. As everyone who has done cooperation and collaboration knows, it's complicated, but I believe it's worthwhile.

LR: Every collaboration is complicated.

LJ: Absolutely. But I think it's very worthwhile, and I feel that students come out of this program with a sense of reality, perhaps more so than in some other programs.
LR: Because most of the projects are hands-on and involve real clients.

LJ: Exactly.

LR: So, it's also about connecting to the local context, the"territoire."

LJ: Yes, and that's the challenge. If we were a French school, it would be easier because students would be exposed to Parisian or French networks and could continue working with them. The added challenge is that our students come from all over the world and tend to return to their home countries afterward. So, the networks they build here may not have a direct professional outcome for them.

LR: And do some of them decide to stay in France after building this network?

LJ: Yes, but then you have other constraints like visas for instance.

LR: Have you ever considered an intensive French introduction course?

LJ: Everyone in this program takes French.

LR: Do they take it voluntarily, or is it mandatory? I'm not sure if it's part of the curriculum.

LJ: It's not mandatory, but I tell them during the interview process that they should take French. And no one disagrees. We've also had a few people who already spoke French.

LR: Regarding methodologies and teaching methods, do you collaborate on this, or do they have carte blanche?

LJ: We discuss the content and review the syllabus together. We talk about learning outcomes, assessment methods, and so on. Last year, we didn't have any students enrolled, so we used that time to rethink the program's structure. What we're offering this fall is slightly different, based on feedback we've received over the years, and we've adjusted the curriculum accordingly.

LR: What kind of feedback?

LJ: We adjust the content every year based on feedback. We have focus groups at the end of each semester, once grades are in and students have graduated. One major change we're implementing next year is the addition of individual coaching sessions, which happened informally anyway. We've decided to formalize it to help students think about their next steps. From day one in the fall, they will start thinking about what they will do after graduation. This was a missing piece. Students come in with a question they want to solve, and they research it during the fall semester, either through bibliographical research or surveys. In the second semester, they design a solution to that question. However, since the course is intensive—30 weeks—they sometimes lose track of the next step. That final project may not be the next step; it could be the beginning of a business idea, but it often isn't. They need to think in parallel about the next step. Do they want to pursue this full-time? Do they want to find a company, NGO, or institution to continue researching this problem? Is this their next career step? Is it something they want to continue doing on the side, or do they want to create a social enterprise around this idea? What's changed since we first implemented this is that we initially thought more students would become social entrepreneurs immediately after graduation. That turned out not to be the case. Most students go to work for existing organizations, so we need to focus less on social entrepreneurship and more on other skills. We used to have a class called Leadership Skills, which focused on self-awareness and building on personal strengths and weaknesses. We've tweaked that class and now call it Skills for Tomorrow. It focuses on skills needed to push an agenda forward, work with others, and achieve goals, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals. The other significant change we're implementing this fall, based on student experiences and the impact of COVID, is a class called Building Resilient Communities. It's about building resiliency in oneself and in working with others, translating into all the soft skills needed for teamwork, co-creation, collaboration, and maintaining mental health.

LR: This interests me a lot because the concept of commons is broad and varies depending on the context. The key angle is building communities and integrating common resources within communities. It's not just about collaboration.

LJ: Absolutely. The notion of the common good and contributing positively to a community requires being in a good place oneself. This is fundamental. It's a practical skill often overlooked in higher education.

LR: Yes, I agree. Could I review the syllabus when it's ready to understand exactly how the course is structured? The course description is probably online already.

LJ: The course description is on the website, and the syllabi will be ready by July 18th.

LR: Great, I have more time. That's pretty much it. I wanted to keep this short, especially if I talk to Victor. He is crucial as I want his perspective since he's directly involved in the project.

LJ: Thank you very much.

LR: Thank you. •

VICTOR SENAVE

Head of Project and Vocation Development at makesense
Co-Director of the MA Design for Social Impact at Paris College of Art

18.10.2024

Lucrezia Russo: Just to give you some context, I'm preparing a thesis for a master's degree at ENSCi, titled Innovation by Design. My research focuses on higher education in art and design, specifically in relation to open-source practices, particularly within the field of graphic design, but also extending to design education in general. My goal is to analyze the formation of communities within institutions to explore how learning and knowledge transmission methods can be improved.
I'm also looking at parallel and experimental initiatives—schools that adopt methodologies inspired by open-source culture and theories of the commons. In this context, I've conducted several interviews, especially with school directors, and I've taken a particular interest in the Design for Social Impact master's program at Paris College of Art, which promotes collaboration and community building. It's within this framework that I wanted to ask you about the collaboration between Paris College of Art and makesense, and how this contributes to the creation of communities, beyond the academic sphere of Paris College of Art. Feel free to tell me if anything I'm saying isn't clear.

Victor Senave: No, it's quite clear. Do you have more specific questions, or would you like me to respond directly based on what you just said?

LR: We can start with your involvement in the MDES program at Paris College of Art. I know that Linda (Jarvin, editor's note) co-developed this master's with another person who's no longer there. I'd like to understand when you joined, whether you were there from the beginning, and get an overview of how the program has evolved. I know there were some adjustments, particularly last year, so I'd like to hear about that trajectory.

VS: Yes, of course. I wasn't there at the very beginning of the program's creation, but I joined fairly early on, probably around the third cohort, or maybe the fourth—I'm not entirely sure. In any case, I'm now on my fourth or fifth iteration of the program. Indeed, there have been some recent changes. Originally, the master's program was designed with the idea that students would become entrepreneurs, creating new ventures at the intersection of social and environmental transition while leveraging their design skills. They were really being prepared to launch entrepreneurial projects.
However, the reality on the ground showed us that few students actually pursue entrepreneurship after the program. Most of them prefer to either join existing collectives or organizations already engaged in these causes or work within more traditional companies.
But in these companies, they act as change agents, introducing initiatives focused on social responsibility, inclusion, or environmental engagement. They aim to influence the organization to adopt more responsible and sustainable practices.
So, we've adapted our approach to better align with this reality. The skills needed to be an entrepreneur are not the same as those required to be a change agent within an existing structure. For example, we used to put a lot of emphasis on collective leadership. Today, we still teach leadership, but we also question what essential skills will be needed for the future. This is how the course *Skills for Tomorrow* was born, which is built around several key pillars.
The first focus is the ability to understand the complexity of global challenges. It's essential that students develop critical thinking skills and be able to grasp this complexity, as everything is interconnected and decisions made in one area can have repercussions elsewhere. We train them to accept that there are no simple answers or perfect solutions, but that every choice must be considered within a broader context.
Then, there's a focus on creating and nurturing desirable futures. We want students to be able to imagine an exciting future. Often, people feel like they're running away from disaster rather than running toward a promising future. To counter that, it's crucial to know how to visualize a better world and to get others on board with that vision. We work with them on methods to refine their ideas and define clear goals. Once they know what they want to work on, we teach them concrete tools, such as the *Desired State* method, to help them project themselves into the future, evaluate where they are, and create an action plan. This helps them to formulate and make their visions more tangible.
The third focus is on developing initiative and adaptability skills. We encourage them to solve problems proactively and adapt to the challenges they encounter. They apply these skills in this course as well as in other modules, like the *design thinking* immersion where they collaborate with a social entrepreneur from the makesense network to solve a real-world problem. They're guided through all the steps: observation, interviews, prototyping solutions.
In parallel, I also lead another course we introduced this year called *Impact Odyssey*. In each session, they receive an email with a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) to be addressed in the field, along with relevant content. They then have to reflect on the impact of their action on their professional future and submit a report to me. For example, for the SDG on gender equality, they printed signage and went to bars to raise awareness among bar owners about gender-based violence in nightlife environments. They had to convince these bars to display the signage and train their staff.
All of this helps them develop their ability to initiate and lead concrete actions that address real social and environmental issues.
From there, it's up to them to go out into the field, to overcome their fears, including the fear of not being able to speak French. This is an important aspect of our method, especially with Marilou: we emphasize the importance of fieldwork experience. We love practical cases, but not the kind where students stay within a safe environment, working only on theoretical projects. What we want are real-life practical cases that involve concrete partners and genuinely committed people. This allows them to connect with key players in the transition—whether they are associations, social enterprises, or NGOs within our networks. That way, they can truly be proud of what they accomplish because there is a real, tangible impact.
One of the main focuses we develop is this capacity for initiative. Alongside that, there are two other skills that are close to our hearts. The first, which is central to our approach, is the skill of «doing things together.» We teach students to better understand others, to recognize different profiles in order to collaborate more effectively, and to use non-violent communication to offer constructive feedback and manage tensions within a group. The goal is to show them how to work together in a healthier way.
We don't offer a specific course on shared governance, but we give them concrete examples, especially drawing inspiration from how we operate at makesense, where we work without a hierarchy despite having a team of 190 people across the world and thousands of volunteers involved. We share tools and insights with them to help them develop their skills in this area.

LR: What type of governance have you adopted? Sorry to interrupt you, but I'm particularly interested in this.

VS: We were supported by the Université du Nous and drew a lot of inspiration from holacratic models. However, we've developed a governance model specific to makesense. We didn't just apply an existing model; we worked with shared governance experts to design a system that fits our organization. For example, when it comes to remuneration, we've adopted a model of self-determined salaries, which differs from some other holacratic models. We also use tools like candidate-less elections and seeking advice before making decisions, which are common in similar governance systems.

LR: Sorry again for interrupting.

VS: No worries! To continue, there's one last skill we try to teach, even though it's only present right now in the Impact Odyssey course. It's about restoring the relationship between humans and the living world. At makesense, we strongly believe that to solve the challenges of our time, it's crucial that humans reintegrate themselves within the living world, rather than seeing themselves as separate from it. It's this deconstruction of current mental models that will help find sustainable solutions. For now, we're introducing this idea through participatory science activities within the course. But we hope to develop this more in the future as we continue to adjust the Master's program.

LR: At the same time, I get the sense that this Master's program, from what you're explaining, is incredibly rich. But it's also quite short, since it's really only nine months, not quite a full year. Fitting everything in must be a real challenge. I was wondering how the synergy works between makesense and Paris College of Art? From our perspective at PCA, this Master's program seems a bit mysterious, because we don't see the students much—they spend a lot of time out of campus. Yet they also have part of the program at PCA, for instance the thesis component. I wanted to understand the dynamic between the two institutions —makesense and PCA—and how you divide the responsibilities. I imagine you and Linda co-construct the program, but in practice, you seem more in charge. How does it work? And why are so many classes held off-campus?

VS: Yes, that's true. To answer your last question, one of the reasons we hold so many classes off-campus is linked to our vision of higher education in relation to the challenges of our time, particularly those concerning ecological and social transitions. We believe it's essential to open our schools and universities more to their neighborhoods, to build relationships with local partners, businesses, etc. That's why we move around a lot.
For example, even for classes that don't require immersion, like Marilou's design thinking course, if we have the opportunity to hold part of it in a local bar, we do. This helps students build human connections with local actors, which is just as important as understanding global challenges. One of the keys lies in understanding what's happening at a local level.

LR: Of course.

VS: So, holding classes in various locations allows us to create these connections.
But we don't just limit ourselves to the neighborhood. We also go to social economy and solidarity structures, or sometimes to places like the Pavillon des Canaux in the 19th arrondissement. This venue regularly hosts exhibitions or events on societal issues, especially on sexual and gender-based violence. It gives students the chance to discover committed organizations, understand how they operate, and meet the people behind them.
As for collaborating with Linda, we typically do a sprint between each edition of the Master's program to evaluate what worked well, what could be improved, and what we'd like to add. We also consider the profiles of new students, since we often have a lot of information from their applications. This allows us to anticipate certain specific needs. However, significant changes are rarely based on student interests but more on course adjustments.
Linda and I also communicate a lot about how the students are experiencing the program, because it's short and intense. It's important for us to keep track of their progress but also their mental well-being. We remain attentive to their mindset throughout the program.
As for the courses themselves, after defining the main goals, we each move forward independently. We keep each other informed of events or opportunities that might enrich the students' experience. For example, when you send us information about conferences, those are the kinds of opportunities we also share with Linda to see if they can benefit the students. There's a key moment of collaboration between the first and second semester because we need to adjust the course that helps students transition from the theory of their thesis to a concrete project. Previously, this course was focused on creating a prototype, but since not everyone pursues entrepreneurship, we've rethought the approach. Now, we aim to help students organize events around their thesis, alongside the academic presentation. The idea is for them to create "aha moments" that inspire others to take action on the topics they address. This could also help further embed the Master's program within the rest of the school and encourage other students to think about how their skills can serve a more responsible society.

LR: And is this the first year you're doing this?

VS: Yes, it's the first time we're testing this approach. There's still a lot to refine, and we'll continue to work on it during the break between semesters.

LR: Yes, of course. I find that very interesting because one of the questions I had was about this local connection. I think this approach is essential for these types of research or actions, but on the other hand, the MDES program feels a bit mysterious to us. The students are often elsewhere and participate less in the PCA community. Since I'm also interested in how communities are built within institutions, it's a unique case study, as there seems to be a sort of "disconnection" of the students. So, it's interesting to see what you're doing to reconnect them with their home institution. I'm curious to see how it will unfold because I think it could be very enriching for students from other departments as well. You don't have any specific details yet about what it could be, do you?

VS: No, it's still a bit unclear. Sometimes, it's hard for the students to imagine organizing events with cross-disciplinary skills without necessarily putting design at the forefront. We'll see how they progress during the semester. At the end of my course, they'll have to organize an event in groups of three on a specific topic, which will prepare them to do it more independently in the future. There's also a key point we try to make them understand: often, they think they need to tackle big, broad issues to make a significant impact. But we emphasize the importance of precision. The more they focus on a specific issue, the better their chances of having a real impact. For instance, working on the design of inclusive spaces for people on the autism spectrum is already an incredible project. We try to show them that this type of targeted project is meaningful, even if they feel that unless they're addressing an entire Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), they're not being ambitious enough. It's through concrete, focused projects that they will truly see the impact of their work.

LR: I understand. Based on your experience, do most international students stay in Paris after their studies, or do they return to their home countries?

VS: Some do stay, but the majority go back. That's one area we'd like to work on more because right now, we lack long-term tracking to see where they are and how they're progressing. We want to integrate more of our alumni into a network with new cohorts, but that requires additional resources. While this isn't a weakness of the program per se, there's still a lot we could do to strengthen this community. For example, we could create stronger connections between alumni and current students to help them integrate more easily into the field of impact design.

LR: I see. Can I also ask you some questions about makesense? What role does pedagogy play within your organization, knowing that it's not your primary focus? How do you approach pedagogy, aside from your work with PCA?

VS: At makesense, we have a strong commitment to pedagogy, particularly around how to spark a «click» in young people and motivate them to take action. Today, many young people are either very activist-oriented or resistant to certain transitions, but there's a large majority, about 70%, who are neither for nor against. Our challenge is to create spaces and experiences that inspire them to get involved. We help them develop the necessary skills, connect with transition actors, and engage in hands-on experiences.
We use a lot of gamification in our methods, so that students have fun, work in teams, and take action in the field. For example, they might participate in local actions like picking up cigarette butts or approaching shop owners to join solidarity networks. These missions, linked to the SDGs, help connect them to their neighborhoods and raise awareness while actively involving them. We firmly believe that action comes through emotion and direct experience, rather than through heavy theoretical debates filled with numbers and statistics. It's a very concrete and immersive approach.

LR: When you talk about schools, are you referring only to higher education?

VS: Today, we work a lot with higher education, but we also have other teams that collaborate with high schools, especially on issues like a just transition and climate justice. However, our coaching and training aren't limited to the academic world. We also work with employees from companies who want to become ambassadors for topics like responsible design or eco-construction, for instance, at Vinci.
We also run clubs for people who manage communities within their companies. These clubs help them share common challenges, and we often act as facilitators. In parallel, we have our incubators where we support many entrepreneurs. From the beginning, training has always been an integral part of makesense.

LR: I was wondering which other higher education institutions you work with, and what kind of collaborations you have with them. Do you also work with design schools, or is it more with institutions in other sectors?

VS: Yes, today, we collaborate a lot with business and engineering schools. However, we have an introductory workshop titled *Is This World Totally Screwed?*, which we offer in all kinds of schools, whether private or public. This workshop is implemented in many universities and schools, and we train our network of volunteers to deliver it across France.
This workshop reaches a wide range of fields, whether it's healthcare, social sciences, or artistic disciplines. The goal is to help participants understand the current issues and think about ways to take action. The workshop lasts two hours and allows participants to dive into different issues, such as climate or social justice. Through exercises, they put themselves in the shoes of people directly impacted by these issues. They also discover resources to continue learning and acting, whether through their schools or platforms like Instagram.

LR: Is a large-scale collaboration, like the one you have with Paris College of Art, unique to PCA?

VS: Yes, our collaboration with PCA is very unique. We have similar course formats with other schools, like Sciences Po, but so far, we haven't co-created a master's program with any other institution.

LR: That's great. I won't take up more of your time—I think you've already given me a lot of valuable information. Sometimes, there's a bit of frustration in not being able to observe more deeply what's happening in this master's program, which I consider not only rich but essential for building a desirable future. I'm excited to see how you'll integrate these new thesis-related projects into the PCA community. I think it will be beneficial for everyone.

VS: By the way, related to everything we've discussed, I've sent you a link to a webinar we're organizing on October 28th. I mentioned a club for community managers earlier, and now we're launching a similar club, but focused on supporting students in the impact sector. The idea is to bring together people who work on career and corporate social responsibility (CSR) issues in schools, to provide them with tools to better guide students and create spaces for sharing and solving our challenges together.
I think you might find it interesting given what you've told me.

LR: Thank you. I'll try to attend. Are there any topics you wished we had covered, or any experiences you'd like to share that we haven't touched on?

VS: No, I think we've covered the essentials. If you'd like, I wrote a short article on some aspects of our pedagogy. I can send it to you if you're interested.

LR: Yes, I'd love to read it!
And thanks again for your time, and good luck with everything. I hope we'll have more opportunities to meet or talk in the future.
Have a great evening!

VS: Thanks, you too! •

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Yaaay ! Offschool is back !!!

❤️

This thesis explores how the economic and sociological theories of the commons can serve as a critical lens for reconsidering art and design education, focusing on institutional structures, pedagogical practices, and community building. It examines how the intersection of commons theories with free open source culture can reshape spaces, tools, and methods for transmitting and sharing knowledge. The investigation is grounded in ethnographic research, including formal interviews with experts in commons theory, educators, and key figures from both formal and informal design institutions. Informal conversations with students, faculty, and staff further enriched the study. The research focuses on institutions across Italy, France, and the U.S.—regions central to the researcher's academic and professional development—offering a diverse and nuanced perspective.

Keywords
Commons, Free Open Source Culture, Design, Art and Design Higher Education

The first chapter establishes a theoretical foundation by exploring the connection between free open source culture and commons theories, drawing on the works of Elinor Ostrom, Lawrence Lessig, Aaron Swartz, and Massimo de Angelis. It defines key analytical pillars—pooled resources, community, and commoning—that structure the study. **The second chapter** analyzes systemic challenges in art and design education caused by market-driven pressures, institutional priorities, and the resulting fragmentation of social dynamics within schools. Drawing on bell hooks' call for "resisting and transgressing" and Sara Ahmed's framing of complaints as tools for change, it emphasizes the need for schools to recognize their social fabric and foster resilient communities. **The third chapter** explores how commons-based practices can inspire educational models. Experimental initiatives such as Muriel Cooper's Visual Language Workshop, the Processing Foundation, and the School for Poetic Computation serve as counterpoints for reconsidering the structures of higher education institutions. Through the analysis of three institutions central to this ethnographic research—Paris College of Art (PCA), Istituto Europeo di Design (IED), and ENSCI–Les Ateliers—the chapter highlights how commoning can operate as a design process. This approach is understood as an iterative loop emphasizing continuous testing and experimentation—not only of pedagogical practices and institutional processes but also of the resources themselves. **The research concludes** with a reconsideration of the Offschool educational project as a prototype for enabling transformative practices in design education.