

America's invasion of our education system

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Schweizer Kunst = Art suisse = Arte svizzera = Swiss art**

Band (Jahr): **- (2003)**

Heft 2: **Déliés**

PDF erstellt am: **21.05.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-626729>

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AMERICA'S INVASION OF OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM

Can anyone nowadays be anything but skeptical when it comes to the subject of reforms? One reform after another sees the light of day and, in the present political climate, how many of them end up making matters worse rather than better. Add to that the endless discussions and sessions that use up so much of the energy that could be put to a better use elsewhere, especially in times of ever tighter budgets. Yet more reforms are in the offing, this time in the realm of education: In 1999, 37 European countries – including Switzerland – signed the Bologna Declaration, with an eye to rendering the curriculum and degrees of their universities and advanced colleges compatible with the European system. To this end, the goal is the introduction of a two-tiered higher education system based on the Anglo-Saxon model of bachelor's and master's degrees. In short, a master's (after 4½, to 5 years of studies) is to replace the university licentiate or diploma, while a bachelor's (after 3 years of studies) would be awarded by the advanced colleges, leaving open such questions as what exactly such a degree would be worth, and which of the advanced colleges would also be entitled to issue master's degrees.

Switzerland, too, has committed itself to the reform process and is seeking to organize its curriculums to ensure they are Euro-compatible, notwithstanding the added complication of the federal nature of its education system. With respect to art studies above all, the matter promises to be quite problematic: At the eight «Schools» of Design and Art (five of which belong to one of the seven advanced colleges or «UAS» – universities of applied sciences – as they are now termed in Switzerland: the German Swiss Hochschule and Fachhochschule and the French Swiss Ecole supérieure), the full course of study lasts three to four years (without the foundation course). What would be the value of a professional qualification obtained in three years (as stipulated by the Bologna Declaration to obtain a BA) remains to be defined. Clearly, a master's degree program is called for in the fine art and design realm.

So far so good. The debate gets more heated, however, when it touches upon the one-year Vorkurs (foundation course), which, emerging unscathed after many years of existence, has by now become traditional. It is here that students can brush up on their artistic/creative skills – increasingly neglected in the Volksschule (elementary school for ages 6 to 14) – and that they can acquire a foundation for their future specialization. Institutions of higher education and artists alike are convinced that the Vorkurs should remain. However, the current debate over reforms and, above all, the pressure to reduce

costs in several cantons, threaten to sacrifice that year unless its worth can be proven, unless it can be integrated into the new structures and, finally, unless it is inserted in a slot of the law – currently at the planning stage – on vocational and UAS institutions of higher learning. So far, this has not been achieved, even though the «Profile of Schools for Design and Art» drawn up in 1999 by the cantons stipulates a one-year preparatory course as a requirement for pursuing studies in such schools. The usefulness of this cost-effective orientation year, which at the same time eliminates the expense of a selection process, has not yet been officially recognized. As a result, it keeps cropping up here and there as a bone of contention whenever some budget program targets cuts in the realm of higher education. Misconceptions on the subject have been especially rampant during the reform process: Careful investigation is required to establish which branches and courses would best contribute to meaningful and ultimately financially viable curriculums. Indeed, already now it is obvious that, should the Vorkurs be abolished, it would in all likelihood have to be reinvented, preferably as a basic course that would be best at the upper secondary level, but in any event at the university level. The latter case would be at great extra cost, if only because of the higher salary level in tertiary education. Time will tell which solution will be adopted during the reform process, but one thing is already clear, and that is that abolishing the Vorkurs would make little sense financially.

For this reason, the country's artists have joined the art and design schools in support of maintaining the foundation course. Artists having taken the course, such as Yves Netzhammer, describe it as «a time full of new outlooks thanks to the wealth of subjects available to us at an as yet unspecialized level.» To Roman Signer, it represents «a decisive time in which to develop and deliberate, [...] to acquire self-confidence because of the chance to experiment different creative mediums.» And Josef Felix Müller is certain that «for young people,» this orientation year is «an important phase of their creative self-discovery.» Without a doubt, all the artists who attended this course consider it as a vital stage of their professional development.

The Vorkurs is held in high esteem by artists and academies of art not only in Switzerland, but also abroad. In Germany, for instance, it has been established that applicants who have accomplished the Vorkurs in Switzerland and wish to continue their studies abroad have an almost 100% chance of passing their entrance exams at a German academy of art. The course's structure is highly appreciated far and wide because

it leaves a full range of professional possibilities open, while at the same time providing opportunity to accomplish concrete projects. As such, the portfolios drawn up by the students open many a door to them for the continuation of their careers in either art or art-related fields. Not only future independent artists but also candidates for other jobs dealing with the visual arts have much to gain from such a basic and wide ranging artistic foundation: The Vorkurs represents the best possible professional springboard for anyone aspiring to take on the ever more demanding tasks belonging to the visual arts realm. Especially nowadays, secondary school graduates should definitely not be deprived of the artistic preparatory course because – given the ever greater international competition in the fields of commercial art, design, and communications – the pressure is on employers to find topnotch apprentices with a solid background. Not to mention how much scarcer apprenticeships in general have become, due to the critical situation on the labor market. After completing their compulsory schooling, many young people – disillusioned and at a loss about what to do – turn to employment agencies where, just to keep their spirits up, they end up enrolling in one of the various government-subsidized employment programs. Instead of economizing anything, the abolishment of the Vorkurs would merely shift the problem around or, worse still, in the words of the filmmaker Fredi Murer, it would be to saw off «a branch supporting a major potential for creative people who could have been of future use to industry, business, design and the entire artistic realm.»

Further dismantlement of the education system has recently been taking place in another form, as illustrated by the debate over the Vorkurs that attained parliamentary level in St. Gall, where petitions and strong protest did avoid the repeal of the course. Offsetting this, however, was the instauration of heavy tuition fees as a solution intended to «bridge» the problem until such time as the higher education system reform process has been carried through. Less well-off students who are unable to afford the tuition are expected to seek help from their home canton, where they can apply for a scholarship. Obviously, this involves a lot of red tape and extra work for both the applicants and the authorities. Moreover, by now it is an open secret that, at all levels, scholarships are being reduced or transformed into loans. All too obviously, this hurdle will discourage many prospective students. By the same token, it also indirectly affects equal opportunities, to the point that, apparently, the new yardstick by which to measure a candidate's chances of attending design and art schools will have more to do with his or her financial status than with talent or

skill. Considering also that more and more women are seeking to pursue a career in art and design, it can also be noted that they in particular are affected by such measures.

A similar trend is likewise making itself felt among the «comprehensive» (traditional, academic) universities. In Zurich, for instance, the idea of tripling tuition fees was recently broached. Both academic universities and UAS art schools share the same problem, since neither – contrary to technical, business and industrial institutions of learning – can count on powerful sponsors. Finally, the dismantlement of the higher education system not only encourages the erosion of the equal opportunities principle, but also represents a waste of one of Switzerland's main resources – namely, the high-quality and internationally renowned level of education in all the national schools at the students' disposal. And it is this very education which, in the final analysis, we will be needing the most in the future, if we are to tackle the long-standing problems in the art realm, as already explicated in the 1975 Clottu Report¹:

«During this century, just about everything has become technologically feasible. However, the environmental changes brought on by progress have fallen out of step with the developmental needs of Nature and Man. Moreover, only rarely are the multiple interventions arising from technology deliberately designed, so that the people of Western civilization have become increasingly destabilized in their relationship to the most vital facilities of their environment. Indeed, some of today's commonplace phenomena are no longer understandable to our contemporaries, who are being flooded with visual impressions that they no longer even seek to read nor, consequently, to use. Literature on education refers to «visual illiteracy.» It is important to counter such illiteracy, and who better than the art and design schools could take up this challenge? The education and training they provide lead to deliberate creative intervention on Man's environment – intervention that consists of contributing to the recognition and solution of various tasks involved in environmental design.»

Roberta Weiss-Mariani

¹ A group of experts commissioned by the Department of the Interior to prepare a national report on Swiss cultural policy. The report was published in 1975. Still today, it represents a major reference in discussions dealing with questions of culture.

ANNINA MATTER

The Vorkurs (basic course) was absolutely great, my very best year! I felt in good hands there, in the midst of like-minded people pursuing the same interests as I was and dealing with questions that were also important to me. I felt satisfied on all counts. *** At the same time, I enjoyed the enormous liberty granted us. Although expected to fulfill certain basic requirements and hand in various assignments, my main feeling was that I was simply allowed to do whatever I wanted to do. *** I found that very motivating, even if in some ways it meant starting all over again. After all, as a graduate of a teachers' training college, I already had a profession. Now I was obliged to re-orient myself and decide which direction to follow career-wise. So it was a year that furthered my career while at the same time providing all sorts of new openings. Suddenly, so much seemed possible once more. *** That is the way it was on a smaller scale as well, where we were encouraged to develop our projects in autonomous fashion, which I really appreciated. No longer, as in former times, were we expected to advance small step by small step; instead we were called upon – and learned – to define our goals, and to draw up and carry through a project on our own. *** That the Vorkurs opens our eyes and sharpens our perception is easily said, but following it myself was a truly intense experience. *** During that time, I learned what designing really means. I was able to get a clear picture of the various professions I had in mind, because we were put into contact with professionals from outside the school, who helped us carry through a «real life» project. *** Actually, it was there that I finally decided on the studies I wished to pursue, something I could never have done without such a foundation. Now I knew what I wanted – in that sense, the Vorkurs was truly an eye-opener.

Annina Matter, currently enrolled at the HGKK in Berne (in visual communication), completed the Vorkurs in Zurich last year (excerpt from an interview with Laurent Schmid).

ANDERS GUGGISBERG

It is as somewhat of a greenhorn that one embarks on the Vorkurs (basic course) – in my case, much like I was after finishing junior high (Mittelschule). And no sooner embarked, than already the scales fall from our eyes. It is in fact a year of budding perception, a year that heightens our awareness to the point that, everywhere, we start seeing little colored dots that went unnoticed before. *** The Vorkurs offers a grab bag of starters – here a bit of video, there a bit of photography. And this is precisely what gives you a better basis for deciding which branch to follow: film, design or, perhaps after all, drawing. Undeniably, it helps in this respect. *** In the olden days, young people were packed off to a farm for a week or two, which was a meaningful event in their lives. You could say that as far as encouraging perception, the Vorkurs is a super, modern-day version of that tradition. *** I was lucky enough to take the course during a «Langjahr» (four terms instead of three), which even gave me an extra quarter. It remains a memorable year for me, in contrast with the specialized courses I took afterwards. Indeed, the Vorkurs was an enjoyable time with much to learn. *** One simply has to open one's eyes and allow a certain sense of perception to awaken – that's actually all it takes, and nothing more. *** Not that it is anything you could acquire at a Migros Club school. The two are worlds apart. *** Naturally, it represents an investment, but to me, one well worth the while. *** Moreover, it would be hard during the following years of study to catch up on the wide-ranging knowledge and experience to be gleaned from the Vorkurs.