Writing Visual Culture

Learning from History – But How? Design history and the practice-based education system at Swiss Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS)

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Abstract

Despite the richness of its history of design and design education, design history has no academic affiliation in Switzerland, even today. There is no chair of design history anywhere: not at traditional universities, not at the two Federal Institutes of Technology, or at the newly-founded Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS). In 1995, the period of vocational education at traditional schools of arts and crafts starting in the late 19th century ended by law. Ever since, all universities have formed part of a standardized education system following the Bologna reform. The curricula were shortened from five years vocational training at Art School to three years at UAS. This created a situation in which curricula should not appear to be professionally instrumental. Courses in history are compulsory in all design curricula even if they're not backed up by design studies. Although UAS have to conduct research by law, many of them have missed out on researching the history of their own disciplines so far. Hence the question which historiographical approaches (Fallan, 2010) could not only meet the demands of a practice based education, but also enrich the discourse of neighbouring disciplines is open to debate. This debate takes place in networks linking academia with independent experts, practitioners, and researchers. Hence, Switzerland can serve as an example to show why, where, and how design historiography should be implemented as a field of study in a predominantly practice based education system.

Introduction

Graphic design put Switzerland on the international design map (Hollis 2006). By the 1950s Swiss designers had developed a uniquely clear graphic language which, in Richard Hollis's eyes, matched the country's reputation for efficiency and precision. Appearing not just in posters but in advertisements, brochures and books, Neue Grafik or Swiss Style, as it became known, was respected internationally for its formal discipline, and for its teachability to which this style lends itself perfectly. The underlying method – closely linked to constructivist-concrete art, especially at the so-called Zurich school – was based on constructive principles as the grid. Exercises developed by graphic designers like Josef Müller-Brockmann for their teaching were soon disseminated internationally. The importance of teaching was also discussed in journals like the influential *Neue Grafik* at that time (Hollis 2006: 210-211; Hofmann 2016: 337-345).

Design teaching and design historiography are closely linked in Switzerland, because design history has traditionally been affiliated with art schools rather than academic universities. As difficult as this situation can be, it also has its advantages. How can design historiography profit from design history in a practice-based context? Could such a partnership even contribute to general historiography, by considering design as part of the 'third culture of knowledge' (Mareis 2011)? And if so, what would be necessary to accomplish this task?

I. Situation: Research

Graphic design may well be the best-researched design field in Switzerland. Nonetheless, literature on graphic design and typography in Switzerland has so far tended to be associated with issues of authorship and patronage, and it has been characterized by thematic and geographic restrictions, as Lzicar and Fornari point out in their reader *Mapping Graphic Design History* (Lzicar and Fornari 2016: 9). [Fig. 1] As a result, a number of questions remain unanswered. For instance: what roles have education systems played in the formation of Swiss graphic design? This leads to another, methodologically tricky question: how to reconstruct actual teaching and/or its underlying, often unwritten teaching methodology, and how to correlate with the practice of ex-students? Also open to question is the definition of the topic in a broader sense. The history of graphic design was long defined through a rather narrow geographical focus on the German-speaking part of Switzerland,

and through a focus on classical graphic production, leaving out the visual design of everyday objects such as tourist souvenirs.
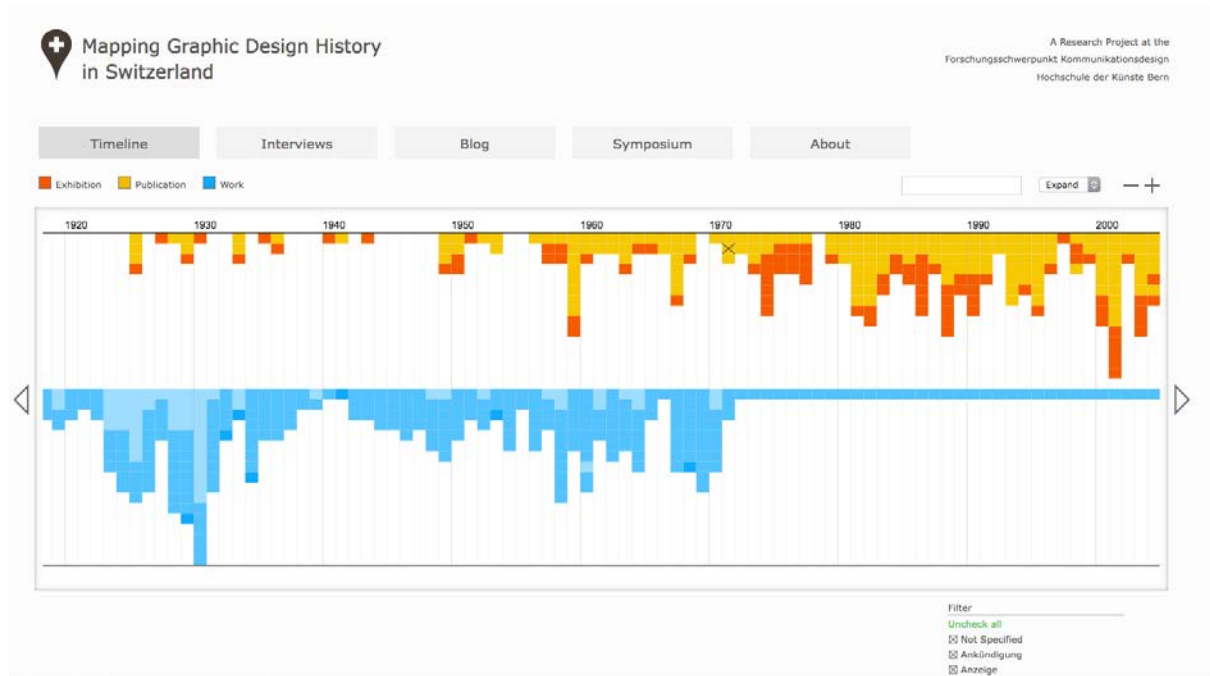

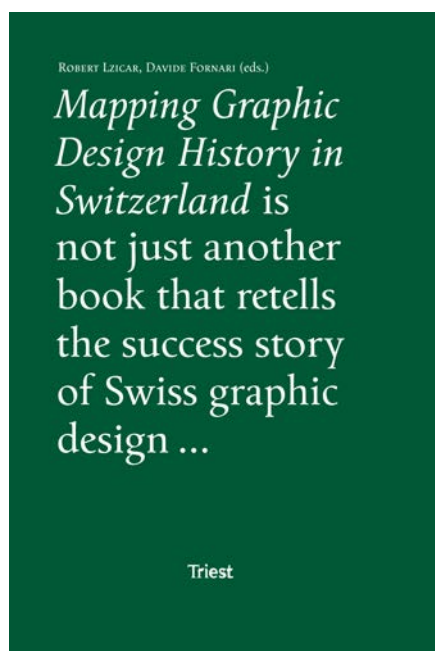**Figure 1 - Research Project, Mapping Graphic Design History in Switzerland**
http://mappingswissgraphicdesignhistory.ch/

Figure 2 - Robert Lzicar, Davide Fornari, eds. 2016. *Mapping Graphic Design History in Switzerland*. **Zurich: Triest Verlag.**

Lzicar and Fornari want to foster a scholarly discussion on theoretical and methodological approaches, making them accessible to students, teachers, and researchers, as well as to professional graphic designers and a broader public (Lzicar and Fornari 2016: 10). This is reflected in the structure of their reader, which focusses on education, on issues of professional graphic design, and on archiving and disseminating – e.g. on the production and mediation of historical discourse in design culture (Lzicar and Fornari 2016: 12). The reader [Fig. 2], based on a reference tool and database developed through extensive research into the writing of modern graphic design history in Switzerland served as a preliminary study for a joint research programme supported by the National Science Foundation (SNSF). In *Swiss Graphic Design and Typography Revisited*, researchers from seven Swiss universities investigate the role and status of graphic design. The three-year project began in October 2016 as the biggest research collaboration established in the design field since the National Science Foundation began its activities in 1952. The project represents an exception, especially in terms of funding and joint research. [Fig. 3]
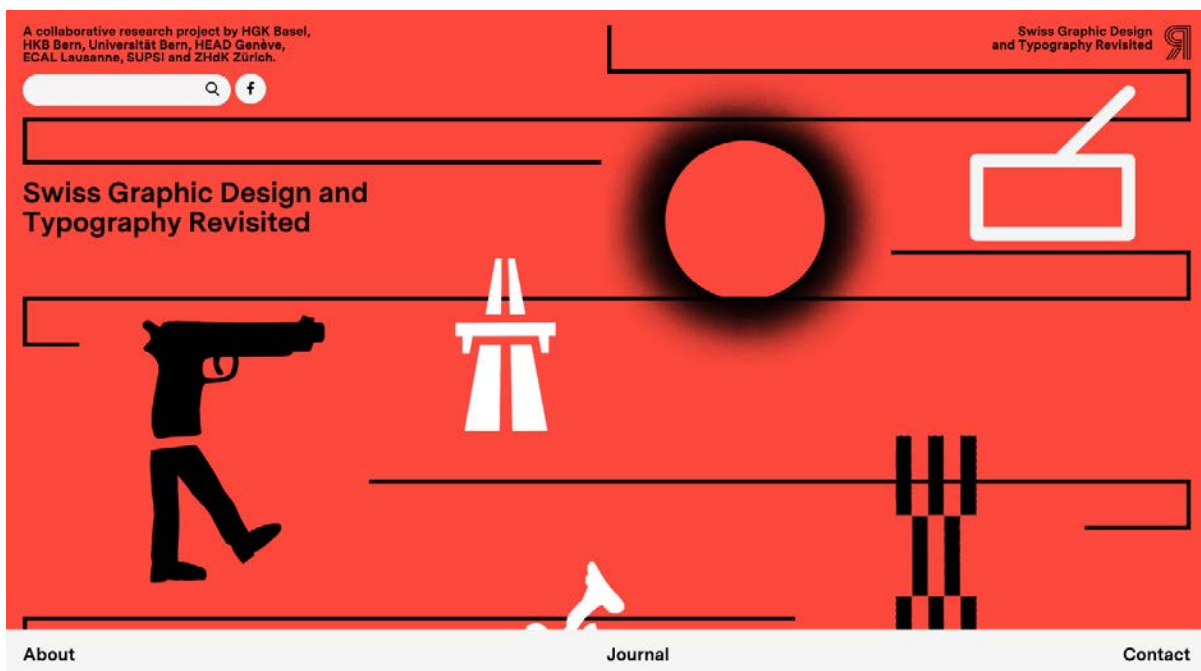

Figure 3 - Research Project, Swiss Graphic Design and Typography Revisited
http://www.sgdtr.ch/

There are, however, other research projects on Swiss design history at UAS, such as *Design – Material – Display*, a project on the prestige shoe manufacturer Bally, carried out at Zurich University of the Arts ZHdK. [Fig. 4] It explores the design and economic challenges faced by the shoe industry between 1930 and 1950, and examines how the diversification of clothing brought about by industrialization extended to footwear products. The project's scope is based on a cultural history of design, embracing production, mediation, and consumption, and the analysis poses complex questions. For example: What was the role of designers in industrial shoe production, at a time when neither the term 'designer' nor professional training for industrial designers existed in Switzerland? How are economic decisions and fashion developments interlinked? The authors also deal with issues of material scarcity, in particular of leather during the Second World War, analysing how this scarcity led to technical and design innovations, and how they were commodified. The principal aim is to gain an exemplary and comprehensive insight into an industry that developed between 1930 and 1950 into a form that persists to this day.

Figure 4 - Research Project, Design – Material – Zeigen. Schuhe am Beispiel des Schweizer Unternehmens Bally, 1930-1950, ZHdK
https://www.zhdk.ch/en/researchproject/432975

To name a further example, a research group of historians at Lucerne School of Art and Design HSLU has analysed the rise, fall and heritage of the silk industry, through written, visual and material sources. Using corporate archives as their research base, they employ methodologies of economic, social and cultural history, complementing archival documents with oral history interviews. What makes this project remarkable is the fact that it also uses insights and synergies derived from the applied research project *Silk Memory*, which resulted in a complex online database for research and design tool containing more than 3000 entries on fabrics, patterns, producers, and designers. [Fig. 5] Historians profit from the knowledge of textile designers, and vice versa, be it issues pertaining to the history or taxonomy of production techniques, or the evaluation of their aesthetic possibilities. Similar to experimental archaeology, experts reconstruct production techniques to assess their potential more precisely. Moreover, the project is linked to the Chair for History of Technology at ETH Zurich, and profits from discussing methodological approaches for a new history of technology while offering insights for design students.
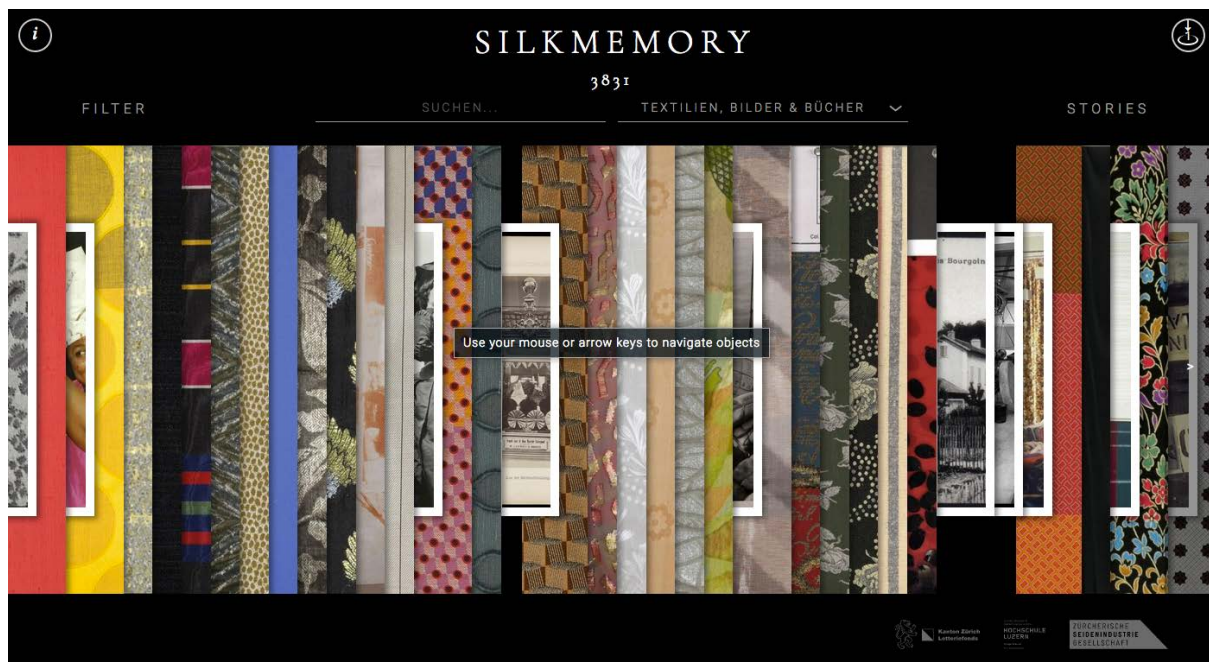

Figure 5 - Database of Research Project, Silk Memory. HSLU Design & Kunst
https://www.silkmemory.ch/

All three projects explore objects of research linked to Switzerland. Do they inscribe themselves in a tradition of 'national' design historiography? Only in terms of subject matter: this would be the tentative answer. It is difficult to be more specific, as there are hardly any studies on Swiss design historiography and its underlying discourses, although important voices have contributed to the field – such as Sigfried Giedion, Stanislaus von Moos, Arthur Rüegg and Claude Lichtenstein, to name just a few. The lack of thorough research is even more apparent when it comes to specific design fields like industrial design, or more recent fields like media, interaction, or game design.

II. Institutional framework

This lack of historiographical studies has to do with the institutional framework of academic research. Design history has no academic affiliation in Switzerland, even today. There is no chair of design history anywhere in Switzerland: not at traditional universities, not at the two Federal Institutes of Technology, or at the newly-founded Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS).

In 1995, the Swiss law regulating applied sciences education was revised (Ernst 2015: 358). Three years later, seven Universities of Applied Sciences were founded on the basis of this reform. They all offer courses of study in design. The reform ended the period of vocational education at traditional arts and crafts schools, which had sprung up all over Europe in the latter third of the 19th century. UAS are now on an equal footing with traditional universities, yet different. The commotion surrounding what was soon to be decried as 'academisation' belied the fact that the reform in design training led to a real wave of development, and to redefining educational practices. It fuelled the discussion about design teaching. How to define and teach the specific knowledge required in professional practice? As a craft or as a science? In the workshop or in the studio? Should it be understood as vocational or academic?

The shortening of curricula from five years of art college to three years of university was due to new state funding schemes. It put pressure on teaching content, especially on areas deemed not to be instrumental to professional activities, such as design history. Although courses in design history are compulsory in all design curricula, design history is not – or at least not sufficiently – backed up by historical research at UAS. Although they are considered equal to academic universities, UAS still cannot provide graduate education for their own junior academics. A third cycle is not yet within reach for them, for several reasons:

resistance within educational policy; the reluctance of regular universities eager to maintain the sole right to award doctoral degrees; and uncertainty surrounding definitions of design research. In the meantime, design universities have established joint PhD programmes with partner universities abroad. The complaint about the lack of historical research in design is twofold. On the one hand, who is supposed to do it, when design curricula terminate with a master's degree? On the other hand, how to do it in order to position design as both a field of academic research and a distinct, self-reflective practice?

Institutionalised as UAS, design universities are required by law to conduct so-called applied research. They have succeeded in building up the necessary structures, resources and funding. Pure research remains the preserve of traditional universities. Nonetheless, design universities have had to organise their own basic research in areas neglected by traditional universities, and they have founded several institutes of design theory that fulfill an important task. However, with few exceptions, these institutes have missed out on researching the history of their own field.

This specific institutional framework determines which historiographical approaches could best fit in a practice-based education system. How can we prevent design history as a field of academic study from getting a 'strangely instrumental and legitimatizing flair', as Fallan (Fallan 2010: 25) put it when he criticised Dilnot's approach (Dilnot 1984: 3-20)? How can we avoid the common pitfalls of instrumentalising design history as a resource for designers, and reducing it to the status of a quick Google image search?

III. Teaching: Cases

Teaching plays a decisive role at UAS. Courses in design history are offered at introductory as well as advanced levels across all design disciplines. Most of them are developed to engage with and reflect upon emergent practices and discourses, and to trace them back to their origins. In this respect, design history is a means to form a better understanding of the present and the future of design. Design students are eager to know what will be coming. They are a bit less interested in what has been. But design has never been a greenfield strategy; it always runs into already-occupied and regulated terrain.

Teaching methods are manifold, but one approach that many would support is to empower students to obtain an active understanding of how history interacts with creative processes in general, and of design history in particular. Or, as Meikle put it: '[...] a historical

approach can indeed illuminate contemporary issues without directly addressing them [...]' (Meikle, 1995: 74).

Coming from a variety of academic and design-related backgrounds, most of us follow a more or less constructivist approach to teaching, as was made clear in an open discussion in 'Netzwerk Designgeschichte'. This informal network brings together design history teachers, designers, researchers, and publicists in Switzerland and was founded 2016 following an essay published in the magazine *Hochparterre* (Ernst 2016: 3).

Paola De Martin's background as a textile designer is decisive for how she conceives herself now as a design historian (De Martin 2017). As a practitioner she felt that the general attitude of designers towards design objects was marked by a great proximity. She found this attitude very problematic in the 1990s, not just because it reproduced existing power relationships but, above all, because it did so without reflecting them. Reflection needs distance. This is the reason why, after all, she studied history, and even more, why she teaches history to design students today.

Besides creating parallel timelines of design, social, and political history since 1750 with her students, De Martin uses graphic illustrations from sociological literature representing inequality in Switzerland from 1900 until today. She draws them on sheets of paper, so that students can walk on them. She puts pictures of her own family on them and talks about visible and invisible changes in lifestyle related to social mobility. [Fig. 6] The students do the same, discussing questions like: how to describe a family's lifestyle? Does it depict poor, rich, or midle class taste? Skilled or unskilled design knowledge? Inherited or hard-won taste? How is social up- and downward mobility reflected? How do differences in legal status, in race and gender matter for aesthetic choices? And finally, how to connect these insights with daily routines as practitioners?
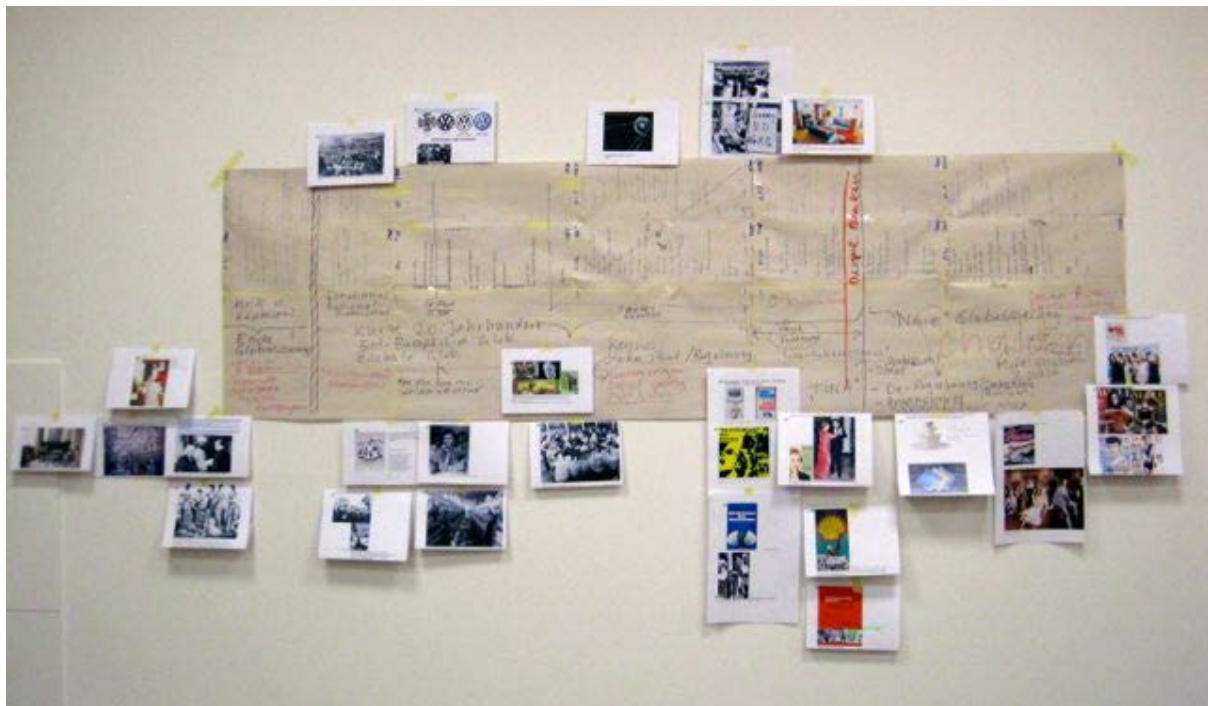
Figure 6 - Paola de Martin relies on constructivist approaches in teaching design history to design students. Photo credit: Paola de Martin.

De Martin's aim is not to impart encyclopaedic, normative or positive knowledge, but rather to implement social practices: sober and open debates, engaged and shared reflections about the designerly creation of value, be it aesthetic or economic. Along the way, she also outlines the historical chances and socio-economic limitations of creation processes. Her proposal is connected with her research project at ETH Zurich, in which she examines the career, lifestyle, and design practice of designers coming from an educationally deprived social background since the 1970s. She adopts an empirical approach to close a gap in Swiss design history: the investigation of design practice based on class as a category of difference. Drawing on methods of oral history and other sources, her work focuses on the social mobility of designers from educationally weaker backgrounds. How do they evolve from being consumers of popular culture into producers of high design culture?

Sociologist Franziska Nyffenegger does not teach design history as such. However, she has noticed that each of her design theory lessons leads to historical questions sooner or later (Nyffenegger 2017). Students do tend to have a rather narrow knowledge of general history and historiographic methodology, although they are required to hold a university-entrance diploma (A-level exam) to enter a UAS. Empowering students to understand what history is all about and to explain the specificity of design history is therefore crucial.

Nyffenegger tries out constructivist approaches in her course for second-semester industrial design students at ZHdK. She asks students to draw anything that crosses their mind when they hear the terms 'Bauhaus' or 'functionalism' before discussing related texts. Such exercises help to deconstruct clichés in a medium familiar to students, namely drawing. Combined with texts, this leads them – on a methodological level – to scrutinise the role of conceptual history. As a basic reflection in methodology, it improves their understanding of how conceptual thinking is intertwined with practice, and vice versa.

Franziska Müller-Reissmann heads the Material Archive at ZHdK and teaches design history (Müller-Reissmann 2017). Her interest lies in material knowledge. There has been an explicit education about, with, and through materials since at least the 18th century. This approach propagated materials as a condition for understanding the world, though its history and objects are little-known. And yet, knowledge of materials is in high demand among designers and the industry. Students learn to apply materials with respect to a specific task, but less about the history and politics of materials. Müller-Reissmann emphasises the historical constructedness of material discourses, such as the discourse about sustainability. She investigates how materials are embedded in a global cycle of raw material extraction, product manufacturing, distribution to and use by consumers, and disposal. In scrutinising materials with respect to resource scarcity, ecosystems and recycling, she brings students to examine not only the historical dimension of materials and material semantics, but also underlying social conditions of this cycle, including a critical approach towards marketing mechanisms as greenwashing, towards the pitfalls of mass consumption, and the politics of attribution of value. [Fig. 7]

Figure 7 - Interest in material knowledge informs the teaching of Franziska Müller-Reissmann, Head of Material Archive at Zurich University of the Arts
Photo credit: ZHdK, Betty Fleck.

Alexandra Midal at Geneva University of Art and Design (HEAD) asserts that at the forefront of her educational model 'is the goal of acquainting students with historical figures', (Midal 2013: 27). This may sound like a traditional art-historical masters approach. But by combining it with practice-based projects, she manages to go much further, as demonstrated in the homage to Charles and Ray Eames her MA students presented at the Milan Furniture Fair in 2013. For *Re-Think the Eames*, students made a film based on the powerful universe of the Eames's complete works, and analysed their *Think Theater* presented at the 1964 World's Fair in New York. [Fig. 8] As the designers intended, the students restaged the limits of the brain's ability to visualise and comprehend. The result was shown on 12-meter angled screens hung on both sides of the space, projecting two films simultaneously. For Midal, this project illustrated her goal: 'to teach designers who are fully conscious of their discipline's complex origins, and capable of honouring them while re-appropriating or bypassing them' (Midal 2013: 27). In addition, the installation opened up new, synchronic ways of analysing the Eames's photographic archive.
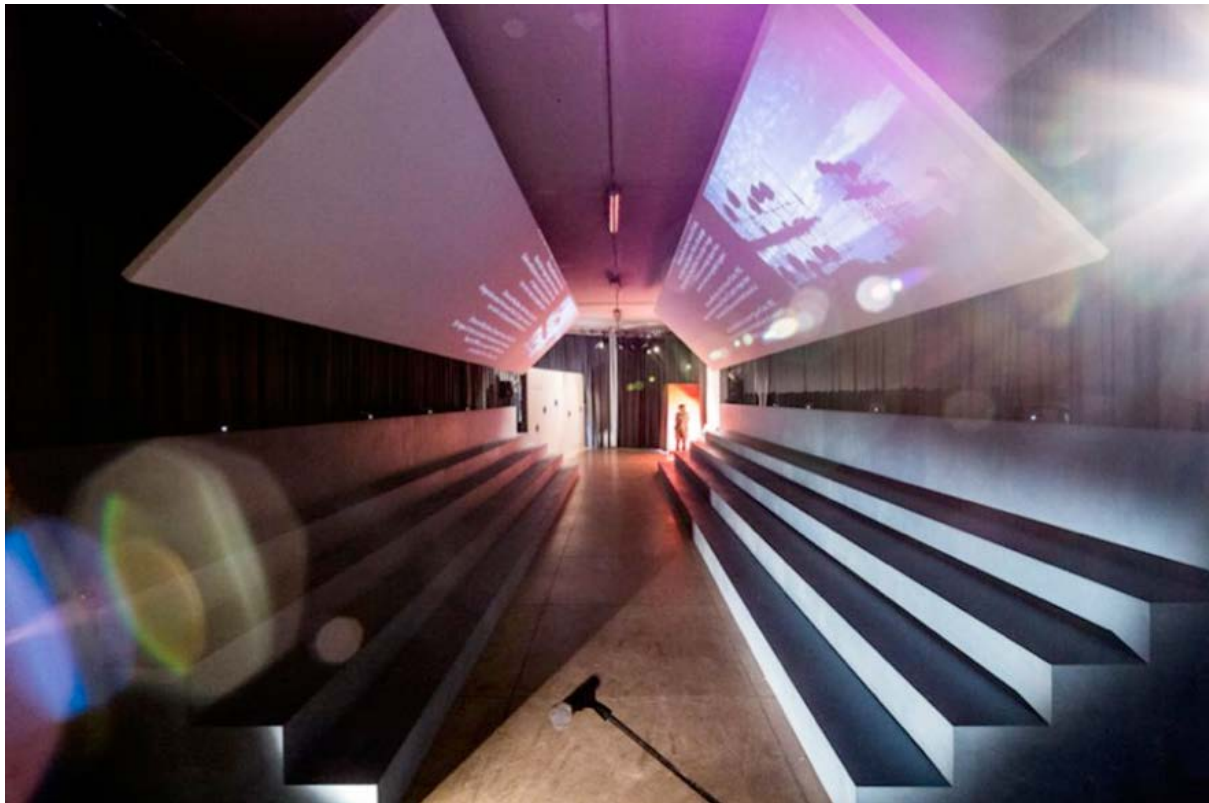
Figure 8 - Alexandra Midal combines practice-based projects as 'Re-Think the Eames' with historical insight. Photo credit: HEAD – Genève 2013, Sandra Pointet et Baptiste Coulon.

IV. Conclusion: Teaching and its role for practice-based design historiography

These few examples are all critical of linear narratives, of a canon, and of reducing design history to designers and objects. The examples mentioned here combinine research and teaching, and bring designers-to-be to consider the history of their own field as a resource – not only as a direct contribution to the design process, but as a means of self-reflection. This differs from a direct functionalist approach, a 'presentist orientation', or normativism, as Meikle (1995: 73) interprets Victor Margolin's and Adrian Forty's approaches. In order to achieve this goal, this approach has to rely on a constructive, creative, designerly way of teaching design history.

How effective this new didactics of design history will be for design historiography remains to be seen. What do designers bring to the academic field? For now, we can only provide a provisional reply. Designers may lack historiographic methodology. But they are experts on design processes, placing into perspective the inherent connectedness of this

discipline with technology, society, culture, and economics. They may not only spur design historians to more critically analyse descriptions of past design processes, but also lead them to ask questions about this process, and analyse its inherent tacit knowledge. I suggest that such an approach may even also lend itself to historiography in general.

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