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A creative swarm in post-industrial times

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Abstract

select_start supports the swarm behavior of newly-formed business ventures as they turn up around design academies. How can the graduates of said academies join forces to form project-related teams? And what are the means to foster creativity, commitment, and efficiency under such circumstances?

select_start gives practical support to about 25 diploma project teams from the Swiss institute for post-industrial design HyperWerk. Their recurring needs are mirrored in the select_start range of offers, and both their successes and mistakes will serve as a guide to those students and other interested parties who will follow in their path. Thus, there will be a give and take between a framework and the individual cases in point.

select_start develops material as well as conceptual resources for interdisciplinary project work, puts them to the test, and analyzes and evaluates them. These resources include references, recommendations, and warnings concerning equipment, locations, media, materials, contracts, platforms, structures, modes of presentation, partner institutions, communities, teaching materials, and teachers.

In the long run, select_start shall, in our vision, establish a network of creative people whose sphere would be, as it were, a virtual design-park containing various institutes, agencies, and enterprises gathered around HyperWerk as the mother institution. This new explorative milieu would function as a transfer-zone between academia, economy, and society.

select_start has taken up a close partnership with the Plexwerk-project, which proposes to reuse twenty Swiss train stations and form a decentralized design park. At present, a first station is being transformed as proof of concept, and special tools are being developed. Commercial activity in these stations might be a kind of public Instant Spectacular Production, with performance qualities. The creative design swarm shall reinvent the acts of production thus leading the way to a more sustainable consumption.

Keywords: HyperWerk; design; postindustrial; swarm; communication; Plexwerk; Instant Spectacular Production; tourism
1. An enterprise for education

Business and universities need each other; indeed, they are mutually dependent. Their exchange raises pragmatic questions and creates fresh concepts as well as the open design space that comes into jeopardy all too quickly in everyday life. In the present information age, the business sector, universities, and various other players of civil society draw closer together. The dividing lines between them are disappearing quite rapidly, and new role allocations allow one to imagine the way towards a homogeneous mix. We believe the university’s sphere to be expanding beyond that of a knowledge authority to include the province of a design laboratory. Therefore, the planning of this future space of possibilities should be one of the tasks of a university institute.

1.1. Fresh approaches and services

The exchange between institutes and other players in the surroundings of an academy for creative enterprises requires fresh approaches and enhanced services. The role of the university is central: as a place for experiment, and as a laboratory for new and bold solutions developed with partners from the outside world. The focus would not be on commercial activity but rather on gaining competence in the processes of solving related problems.

Thus, the focus will also be on developing a project-oriented culture of documentation because this is what makes experience communicable—a form of social sustainability ensuring that we will not have to deal with problems already solved. From the reports generated by such a culture, tools, media, and methods for collaboration between university, economy, and society shall be derived and formulated as “How-To” instructions. Thus will emerge a basis, available to the public, for dealing with local conditions and with global resources.

In order to facilitate attractive project partnerships, the students’ appearance in front of authorities of research, economy, and society becomes more important. The select_start documentation portfolio will be dynamically amended during the academic year. Its modular structure will adapt to the needs of the diploma students.

1.2. The experimental framework

select_start is run by the HyperWerk Institute at the Basel Academy of Art and Design, University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland. HyperWerk was founded as a media institute in 1999 when the dot-com euphoria opened up new vistas for unorthodox ideas. Since then, our institution has the privilege to decide autonomously about its objectives as well as about its educational structures. Moreover, we at HyperWerk are free to respond to current problems and challenges. After the dot-com crash, the post-industrial transformation as well as the corresponding process design have come to the fore.

HyperWerk senses the pulse of the times through its annual questions formulated by the diploma students. Over the past years, we have built a large network of teachers and partners; thanks to their support, the institute can be flexibly reconfigured, according to the problems we decide to tackle. HyperWerk puts its theses to the test on its own institutional body.

In the academic year 2010/11, select_start will explore the transition-zone between creative academy and creative economy and examine it with regard to its comfortable extension. Our newly-graduated HyperWerkers shall no longer be intent to pass through this zone as quickly as possible—rather, they shall cultivate and utilize it as an ideal basis for establishing their enterprises.

2. The swarm approach

select_start wants to establish energetic project communities. How can we coordinate our diploma projects to design an entrepreneurial landscape with mutually supportive players? This research is inspired by the current concepts of cloud computing and swarm formation. Consequently, we at HyperWerk transferred contents and
functionalities of our intranet into Google’s cloud. We believe that such a virtual home will be a suitable exchange-zone between our institute and the associated outside world.

Our first set of field experiments is running until September 2011. The discoveries and insights gained over this period shall be made publicly available through the articles on selectstart.ch as well as through various events.

2.1. What we offer

HyperWerk has ten years of experience in designing post-industrial processes. The institute has an interdisciplinary in-house team of about one hundred students and teachers. Besides these, there are about three hundred external teachers from friendly institutes and agencies, and also some two hundred alumni. Global cooperation as well as open hospitality are a matter of course for us.

select_start begins with 25 diploma projects, each one looking for its individual outward link to creative economy. Ideally, some of these projects should turn into start-ups. A diploma project at HyperWerk usually involves between three and 80 participants—many of them coming from outside our institution. We believe HyperWerk to thus be an outstanding platform for exploring tools and theses for swarm formation in the creative field. With their clear regional references, the instructions and recommendations produced by select_start differ from the well-known manuals for creative survival in decentralized associations.

Despite thorough globalization, regional aspects of law, commerce and industry, design, customs and traditions often remain decisive factors for the success of start-ups. For this reason, local interfaces to global resources will become as important as global portals for our local offers.

2.2. Who we look for

We wish to meet all institutions and interested as well as knowledgeable parties who would like to participate in select_start on a partnership basis. We welcome, for example, proposals for workshops and presentations about aspects of the transition from creative academy to creative economy. We are looking for partners for the prototypical application and testing of the means for project work in the creative field.

We seek the following types to serve as advisers: coaches, consultants, journalists, and sociologists. We also seek partner institutions and enterprises in order to help develop the above. Our students and our pioneering start-ups need pragmatic companions, experienced business angels, discriminating investors, and stimulating project coaches.

2.3. What we hope for

select_start will establish and run several virtual “parks” in which people in different locations can periodically interface. To this end, we seek partners, funding, locations, customers, and media attention. In particular our students will evaluate and design their diploma projects with regard to their mutual usefulness. The experience gained from the above will, we believe, help define primary dimensions of a project-related, non-central culture of collaboration. We at HyperWerk intend to make our findings publicly accessible, bearing in mind that their implications may prove controversial— for the future of universities and for the establishment of an up-to-date entrepreneurial culture. In this way we hope to make good on our claim as a model institute for post-industrial process design.

3. Viable forms of swarm communication

We need proper communication tools in order to attend to the participants of select_start in their process of forming a creative swarm.
3.1. A visual language for creative communities

As an institute that is part of the Academy of Art and Design, we had better come up with our own visual take on swarm phenomena. The look and feel of so many presentations about swarms is not really attractive in the field of creative industries obsessed with originality. We were tired of the all-too literal implementations of this concept. Rather, we went for the qualities promised by a more metaphorical and imaginative approach.

In an experimental workshop with graphic artist Katrin Schacke, our students conveyed the idea that we are experts for creative survival in an unknown post-industrial territory. We combined our photos with “How-To” questions. The result seems to get our target group irritated for an instant–and then interested.

fig1: How to bumble as a bee | How to expand the whole | How to you do | How to be your other self

3.2. A toolkit for communication

Every swarm is a multitude, an assembly of assemblies. Speaking in things, this means modularity. Additionally, dynamic quality is important to our communication strategy. Therefore, we produced a cardboard container conveying the unobtrusive yet recognizable identity we developed for select_start. The students will fill it with their own personal mix of pre-produced tools, and with their own items. During the academic year we will be adding features to this set: booklets, lasered cut-outs, cards, cutting dies, ribbons, stamps, embossing punches, gadgets and arty multiples. Since one of our students is a professional printer, equipped with an old Heidelberg press, we can produce very small print runs of marvellous haptic quality.
3.3. Silk-screened cardboard plus apps for clouds

We think that a combination of luxurious media with highly sophisticated haptic qualities goes perfectly well with the digital sophistication of mobile apps and cloud computing. Since two months, we have been transferring intranet content into Google apps, and the results are promising. We are convinced that the combination of hot and cold media is the way to go for successful instantiation of creative swarms.

The effortless transfer of content between different media, a major feature of today's media technology, suits our purposes perfectly. We have started a mobile app development group, equipped with free iPads--more than a third of our whole student body. Now we are curious what kind of solutions the wisdom of this innovative crowd will produce.

4. A future for select_start through spaces, activities, and alumni

Even Switzerland is facing heavy transition. Swiss design schools are still training many industrial designers, although industrial production has been shrinking for many years, with the service sector and tourism constantly growing. As a design school, we feel responsible for the creative swarm of select_start embarking on their way. Therefore, we are paying close attention to alternative kinds of design-oriented production, and we have come up with a plan to breathe new life into the no-longer-in-use structures found at a lot of Swiss railway stations. This concept combines friendly-and-fun, tourist-oriented innovation with new production realities.
4.1. Alumni potential

To increase our swarm's chances of long-term survival we are trying to reactivate and improve the exchange with our alumni, a vast resource of knowledge and friendship not used to its full potential in the past. We consider the integration of our alumni to be a key module in select_start. We want to achieve this aim through the synthesis of already existing platforms for professional and social networking in combination with project-based team formation. All agents in this network may summon such cells as human resources for their projects–conferences, exhibitions, events. The self-organization of such cells shall be fostered by HyperWerk. The institute functions as a catalyst and as a laboratory, with the alumni cloud providing real-world associations and feedback.

4.2. Plexwerk as a decentralized platform for creative swarms

Since two years, we have been working on our strategic project Plexwerk. Some background: Switzerland has the highest density of railway services in the world. There are around 1,800 stations in total, but many of these have had their counters locked up, and their station masters replaced by ticket vending machines. Plexwerk seeks alternative uses for deserted train stations as a decentralized platform for post-industrial forms of sustainable production. As a first proof of concept, we are transforming a historical train station in the heart of Basel, Switzerland. We want to find out how we can convert deserted ticket counters, empty restaurants and dusty waiting rooms in approximately twenty railway stations all over the country into a networked platform for experimental tourism and sustainable production. As a gateway to its region, each train station will function as that area’s specific interface to meaningful post-industrial production.

4.3. First proof of concept

At present, we use the former customs-hall at the Basel station as a prototypical design-park for entrepreneurial craftsmen with high-tech proclivities. They are fusing knowledge from the performing arts with astonishing machinery into spectacular results. As a basis for the distinct positioning of each spot, we have to identify each region's individual tradition and quality. In our time, tradition and regional culture are endangered by global competition—which brings about an insidious loss of diversity. How can we save beautiful tangibility and sensuous experience in a digitized world?

Plexwerk is based on long-term thinking; we aim to conceive, implement and utilize suitable structures. We have coined the term “neoanalog” to denote the related content elements that have emerged from our research into different kinds of handicraft. We want to develop more intuitive interfaces for users of the complex functions of leading-edge products. “Neoanalog” refers to the design of this digital tangibility.

A crafts culture will always remain attached to a region—which should not simply remain caught up in tradition, in order to make sure that even high-tech products stand out against the anonymous sleekness of so much current industrial design. The more de-materialized the goods and services of our still-to-be-discovered Information Society become, the more important is a tangible counterpoint in terms of their interfaces.

fig3: The ISP-lab in our Plexwerk station
4.4. From artefact to actefact

Our slogan “From artefact to actefact” unmistakably indicates where we want to take Plexwerk and how we envision the path that will get us there. Moreover, we want to expand the role as well as the competence of the designer, and to enable the design field to go through a process of emancipation and development from a relatively limited consciousness of configuring the external form of useful objects to the long-overdue encounter with social models.

Design can provide sustainable solutions by conceiving as designable the entire chain of processes—from design to production, sale, use and recycling. Only through designing processes in this holistic way can we overcome the long-standing limitations of mass production, which, at least in Europe, seemed the unavoidable conclusion, if only for economic reasons. Thanks to new and flexible means of production and marketing channels as well as to the growing demand for customizability, craft-related offerings are emerging into a post-industrial reality. The next generation of craftsmen will make them available. Such curious, open-minded practitioners will absorb and expand the holistic approaches and expressive techniques. Plexwerk encourages and supports further development and prototypical implementation of such offers.

4.5. Instant Spectacular Production

Plexwerk strives to achieve this through a model for regional development and a controversial claim. We call this ISP—Instant Spectacular Production, which refers to a rapid production enhanced with performance qualities; a kind of production_cum_consumption. Through a post-industrial culture of spectacular production, Plexwerk provides the experience of local uniqueness—which is the original intent of tourism. With ISP, we want to develop concepts for the production/consumption of sustainable consumer goods that are fitting the Western European economical and ecological situation: narrowing economic margins endanger local mass production, and the anticipated shortage of most resources might bring about a renaissance of products that are designed to last.

fig4: Prototype of balloon welding machine
4.6. Transformation

The friendly technologies of ISP might win a positive influence on public awareness and responsible behavior, without creating guilt and resistance. We have just begun to grasp the vast range of instant spectacular production—very many edible, foldable, inflatable, stampable products and patent ideas may be revised under the fresh axioms of spectacular production. This vital field of design research creates occasions for collaborations between students and alumni of the design institute HyperWerk with industry. At present, we are looking into the potential of machines for 3-D-ceramics printing and of balloon welding machines.

Production should no longer be hidden shamefully, as was the case in the industrial age—it should become again an expression of human innovation, experience and pride. Its performative potential has remained largely unused so far, as technological research mainly has been used for improvements in speed, accuracy and automatization. These qualities ought to be reconsidered in the light of the post-industrial paradigm shift.