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# TRANSDISCIPLINARITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: WICKED PROBLEMS, DREAMS, AND NIGHTMARES

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With this text, I'm probing into ongoing processes at Aalto University in the last five years, which, among other things, led to the administrative decision to remove the University-Wide Art Studies (UWAS) program in 2021. The story starts in 2016 when something quite special was cooking in the Art, Design, and Architecture School, and a truly radical form of transdisciplinary education was lived and enjoyed by many, thanks to UWAS. I want to make sense of the sad fallout from such dream; a fallout that happened despite countless protests at different levels of the organization's pyramid.

When I first came to Aalto, almost six years ago, I was driven to the curatorial and contemporary art studies by the rich concatenation of critical practice and pedagogical experimentation that the Art Masters programs offered at the time. It was an experimental program originally from Pori's TaiK (a unit created in 2002 in the Pori University Center)[1] and integrated in 2014 into the Aalto University project along with the Helsinki University of Technology, the Helsinki School of Economics, and the University of Art and Design Helsinki (the Arabia art program founded in 1871 as a crafts school) that had merged in 2010.

Many things have changed since. Some of those changes have been discussed in [NO NIIN](#) and other [independent media](#) in the past year. At the basis of the debate is a needed critique of neo-liberal white European education and privatization of public universities—a pretty obvious critique, repeated ad nauseam in the [European context](#) and [beyond it](#) without any signs of moving the decision-making one inch. Predictably when discussing Aalto's case, my argument is related to the recent reform of the Art Department (now "Department of Art and Media") via the "Education Portfolio Renewal" that was heavily criticized for impoverishing the rich graduate art offer of Aalto but proceeded regardless, like a bulldozer, in 2021. But my entry point is more modest, and one relatively overlooked in the recent public discussion: the unacceptable early demise of the [UWAS Program](#), of which I had first-hand experience as a student and later as coordinator and teacher. However, the two shifts betray a very particular vision of higher education that has been taking over public universities. I will go back to 2015, through an interview I had with Juuso Tervo last spring in the *Conversation Room*, hoping to re-dimension what UWAS wanted to do, how it managed to do

it, and why it was phased out last year despite being a successful pedagogical pilot.

To begin with, one should have a general scheme in sight here, as it is directly connected with UWAS' existence: institutions have theme-based overarching strategies. What for? Not just to mimic corporations. In the best scenario, they develop these strategies to invest resources or align initiatives across their disciplines and create special programs under a coherent vision. Strategies give a compass for short and mid-term planning; they become tools to respond to matters that seem urgent and relevant over time, allowing organizations to change course as demanding questions emerge from research and the world alike. They have limited budgets, time scopes, and impact. Largely embraced as the sellable symbol and the "cutting edge" of the institutional apparatus, they become the leitmotifs to survive in a harshly competitive international academic arena. It is a sad public secret that the vision and mission of an academic institution are dictated today less and less by well-pondered and inclusive public education policy debates. Rather, it is close-door benchmarking of marketing experts and the interests of other high-level administrators that define them. Afterward, they are trickled down to academics and staff to interpret the meaning of the slogans and implement them as best they can.

However, it would be a mistake to believe these strategies only produce empty slogans, dull PowerPoints, and merchandising. As much as they may make us skeptical and cynical, there's a deep and wide impact to them to be discussed; one that concerns staff and scholars as much as students because it directly affects our work (*we will be measured* for it) and actual opportunities to develop meaningful practices.

Strategies distribute large missional and surplus funding, attached to which comes legitimizing rhetoric and vocabulary that anyone within the organization is "encouraged" to adopt to develop special projects. The strategy's discourse becomes the currency of the prestige economy universities depend upon externally, and largely becomes a gatekeeper of any support for education development, research, and innovation within them. *But, those gates can be as enabling and full of possibilities as they are crippling, merely cosmetic, or*

*narrowing*. What the recent Aalto changes entail boils down to the difference between the first and second scenarios.

One thing was clear already at that point: the merge of the schools meant that artists, scholars, and lower administrative leaders of the Art Design and Architecture School would gradually lose autonomy over curriculum design, lines of research, as well as financial and missional plans of their departments.

One could feel it entering most courses:

### THE DREAM

Back in 2014, Aalto had been trying to find ways to deliver on its promise of integrating the six different schools by arguing that their distinct forms of research, practices, and knowledges could benefit each other in varied ways and presenting itself as a strong platform making these connections happen for the sake of innovation and academic excellence. The dialogue between disciplines was the frame of a win-win scheme, but there were no dedicated resources to make that dream come true (see [Talvin, Tervo, Lyötönen 2018\[2\]](#)), and proximity alone was not going to do the trick. Was improving higher education an aim in this foundational strategic merger move in 2010? Was artistic research considered seriously as part of it? There were many signs that such could be the case. But over time, there has been disheartening evidence of the contrary. It seems that the arts entered what was later unapologetically called the “Aalto brand” to give luxury packaging (building up on the reputation of Finnish minimalistic design and superior crafts) for technology and business-driven academia that is largely devoted to a positivist vision of knowledge and practice. One thing was clear already at that point: the merge of the schools meant that artists, scholars, and lower administrative leaders of the Art Design and Architecture School would gradually lose autonomy over curriculum design, lines of research, as well as financial and missional plans of their departments.[3] Their faith increasingly came to depend on other academics and administrators with scarce familiarity with the aims, value, and substance of their work. Further down this road, even the right to have books inside offices to support research and education activities was stripped away when the school had to squeeze into the asphyxiating call-center facilities of the Väre building in 2018. ... *Books? Who needs them anyway?*

But that was much later...

By 2016, the MA in Visual Culture from Pori to Otaniemi welcomed practitioners from varied disciplines into a multifaceted space of practice and experimentation

professors and lecturers seemed to be thriving in their research and teaching, even when the administrative load of the centralized system increasingly encroached on them. The criticality, sharpness, and dedication of students were salient. The bar to secure a study spot was high *where it mattered*, and people worked hard for it: they put up with a painfully high cost of living in a small capital city where very little happens (Helsinki is no Berlin, London, or Barcelona), long dark winters, meager job

lodged in a modest Aalto building, the *Art House*. The Arts Department masters also surpassed the usual expectations of training art educators or those of art and curatorial studies aimed at catapulting talent to the elite global art scene. Current professors had significant autonomy still over the content of the school's curriculum; the strategic development projects of Aalto allowed the syllabus to delve into complex cultural, social, and political stakes of creative practice, promoting historical, environmental, and contextual awareness and a reflexive form of cultural organizing. A great example of the virtues of this approach was the emergence of Third Space and the Museum of Impossible Forms, an independent project created shortly after by a collective of its ViCCA (Visual Culture, Curating and Contemporary Art) MA graduates. The master's program was the home as well of a series of curatorial and artistic debates on cultural diversity in Finland, and it gave way to a sound critique of the local art field production, a journey embraced and soon led by the editors of this magazine, Vidha, and Elham, both ViCCA alumni.

Infrastructure was also remarkable. Both MA and Ph.D. Art and Architecture students had permanent studios on campus for the duration of their programs and rich dedicated libraries on site. The Arabia campus provided one-of-a-kind facilities for design, art, and craft workshops. Tuition was free in Finland not just for privileged EU citizens but also for non-EU students like me who could not afford 7000€ or more yearly plus living expenses. No wonder this made Aalto irresistible for highly qualified international students *regardless of income*. One could feel it entering most courses: professors and lecturers seemed to be thriving in their research and teaching, even when the administrative load of the centralized system increasingly encroached on them. The criticality, sharpness, and dedication of students were salient. The bar to secure a study spot was high *where it mattered*, and people worked hard for it: they put up with a painfully high cost of living in a small capital city where very little happens (Helsinki is no Berlin, London, or Barcelona), long dark winters, meager job prospects, and a hermetic Nordic culture because Aalto Art Department was *worth it*.

In this setting, the Art Department masters came to be closely supported in 2016 with the vision of the four-year university strategy thanks to the creation of the "Art and Creative Practices Initiative." This special university-level program

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contained a portfolio of projects fostering the connection between artistic work, multidisciplinary creativity, public art, and debates in the public sphere. Two key programs were launched: the SCTA (*Sharing and Co-creating Transdisciplinary Artworks*, including the now defunct Aalto Artist in Residence) and the *University-Wide Art Studies* (UWAS).

According to Juuso Tervo, director of UWAS (2017-2020), Aalto's leadership realized early on that the dream of school integration necessitated an approach to learning and teaching that had yet to be invented, where Aalto could shine bright for innovation—something that, as appealing as it may be, schools could not do as long as they are providing solid foundations in their fields. If transdisciplinarity was going to be the landmark achievement of Aalto, its distinctive cutting-edge vision of knowledge and practice in the XXI century, university-level resources and new staff were needed. And so it was that in 2015, a steering group was created, and a summit with faculty debated questions like: How may the four-year strategy enhance teaching, learning, and research across fields of practice? How could the skills of the future workforce be improved by art and design-based education?

Upon the closure of UWAS, I decided to talk to Juuso about this process to understand what was at stake and what has now been lost.

**JT:** I became part of UWAS's steering group as a project manager and postdoctoral researcher, so I was involved in UWAS's practical and pedagogical development with Kevin Tavin and Harri Laakso. Within the big strategic framework that was set then, we were actually told that “We expect that you change this university”. And we took that seriously. We always went back to this argument, meaning that we were given the task to *not only use* art and creative practices, or to integrate them into some sort of existing processes and practices, but that these processes and practices *would be in turn changed by art and creative practices*. The name of that strategic initiative was “Renewing Society Through Art, Creativity, and Design”, so that's exactly what we tried to do. But again, [...] when we talk about reforms, there are limits to that kind of language: you can change something, but *don't change it too much*, you

know? Or you can introduce new practices, but these cannot be too new or too different, or you'll have something else completely.

We need to acknowledge that the strategy round of 2014 was a really bold move by Aalto as an institution. Even though there were these “administrative nightmares”, there was a publicly stated interest in doing something with art and creative practices. But, of course, there was also the fear that what if the change we were asked to make was only cosmetic, it would only keep things as they were.

**MV:** They are also honoring the history of universities in Europe—a history defined by specialization and hierarchical ways of grouping knowledge; ways of standardizing it and making it reliable and predictable; building up towards this Western paradigm of objectivity. So anything that looks like it's going to introduce change there may threaten the whole power structure—a structure from the Enlightenment. As you say, when proposing something transversal, nurturing, and creating room for what's not thought possible yet, it was not intended that you would destroy this building of knowledge that disciplines need, because the labor market and the world itself are built on this logic. And yet, there's something to be missed in that logic, which UWAS was able to bring in while it lasted. UWAS opened ways in which schools could shake off their boundaries... It inhabited a threshold and investigated what's possible and thinkable there.

**JT:** For me, UWAS was an intriguing opportunity to do something—to experiment with some theoretical ideas I had about art education, put them to action, and see what it actually means to develop and run a program or a unit whose educational philosophy is committed to this kind of open-endedness, experimentation, and encounters.

**MV:** You talk in your article about the tension between autonomy and application: between the free time to explore something without the pressure of coming up with a pragmatic use; considering you may not know how you will apply it until you go through the process of researching it. Or the question about the tools and techniques: we don't

know which tools we need until we understand the problem better. This open-endedness was important in your pedagogical research.

**JT:** Yes. UWAS initially, I think from that very administrative perspective, could have become a tool to teach design thinking to all students outside the arts; data visualization, artistic and creative skills, and stuff like that. A tool that will be used in a certain way to produce certain kinds of outcomes. But then I thought: well, [...] we shouldn't only engage our students in this kind of mechanical learning process by teaching them to use some specific [artistic] tools or skillsets. Instead, we should encourage them to change their mindset so that they'll be open to other ways of knowing and learning and to using the tools they are taught to use in their own disciplines differently.

And the leadership back then saw the potential and was fully supportive of this idea. It started very small, with one pilot course, *Introduction to Visual Culture and Creative Ways of Seeing the World*, and by the next year, it had grown to 15 electives. Then, in 2017, an open call for teachers (inside and outside of Aalto) was created. It received proposals for transdisciplinary courses with artistic methods and practices blended in to tackle topics and problems that could not be owned by any single discipline. By 2020, UWAS had a two-year curriculum with over 30 elective courses offered yearly to bachelor's and master's students, covering a large spectrum of themes and tools (see map below), and bringing in a curated selection of local scholars and practitioners. Each course proposed was unique because it didn't just fill in a topic in a curriculum grid dictated by policy or disciplinary tradition; instead, it stemmed from current research and transdisciplinary practices of teachers, guaranteeing a high motivation to investigate together with students. Some were scholars and practitioners from Aalto (full-time staff who were not getting extra pay and did it out of genuine motivation); others were hourly-paid external teachers.



Map of UWAS and Design Inside courses distributed across topics and disciplines, 2017-2022. Image: Maria Villa

Altogether, this helped refresh and diversify the landscape of teaching perspectives within the institution, something that students valued a lot, and provided a large pull of electives that expanded the options for students to complete their credits and for exchange students to access courses. The student selection criteria (another key feature) was the diversity of backgrounds, and the courses did not have any requisites. By 2021, with their growing popularity, we had to request motivation letters to manage admissions in many of them. Additionally, because the syllabuses of courses were experimental, they could afford to be responsive to the teaching experience of each group. No doubt, an important part of this operation was the active work of UWAS coordinators in discussing with the teachers what transdisciplinarity entailed for the methods and outcomes of each course; and after the courses ended, the shared task to

and outcomes of each course, and after the courses ended, the shared task to reflect on the experience and the learning process and adjust syllabuses accordingly.

And collaboration was essential. As Juuso

explained in our conversation, UWAS provided a unique frame to develop genuine problem-based learning because different from the usual disciplinary-bound and technical problem-solving, in UWAS's courses, the nature and scope of the problem was never set in stone: it needed to be investigated collaboratively, facilitating discussion and hands-on experimentation of students.

## NEGOTIATING COMPLEXITY... ON ALL FRONTS

What could teachers themselves learn from facilitating these processes? That was an important question that created a productive feedback loop. A difficult one, too, because both instructors and students had to navigate and tolerate uncertainty—as is the case with artistic research always—... but that was part of the richness and the beauty many (non-art) students found in it.

And collaboration was essential. As Juuso explained in our conversation, UWAS provided a unique frame to develop genuine problem-based learning because different from the usual disciplinary-bound and technical problem-solving, in UWAS's courses, the nature and scope of the problem was never set in stone: it needed to be investigated collaboratively, facilitating discussion and hands-on experimentation of students. And here, problems often made participants aware (and come to terms) with their disciplinary and cultural assumptions and exposed them to other sets of values and practices. Course projects also weaved in ethical and political dilemmas that technical and more pragmatic education in the different schools may dismiss as irrelevant. Of course, this meant that courses were geared to trigger rich but uncertain processes instead of pushing students for predictable outcomes. It was a type of “slow food” education: nurturing for the long run, taking time to mature ideas (which were often collectively owned), overall a puzzling process at times, not always giving quick or easy rewards... Quite different from the *fast food academia* throwing credits like chicken nuggets to masses of anxious children.

**MV:** Well, something that I heard from my students and from other courses I coordinated is this idea that “this course allowed me to discover that I needed something I didn't know I needed.” So the realization that one was lacking something; and suddenly you see it because you have stepped out of your comfort zone. And it's a bit tricky: you can only express it *post facto*, when it's already happened, and you

suddenly realize that your vision was too narrow before it happened.

**JT:** Yeah, exactly.

**MV:** So how can you sell or promote something that people have not tasted before? How can you develop an appetite for something that you don't know you like? When you insisted on the importance of motivating students to step out of their comfort zone and negotiate in the uncertain territory of this exchange, one of the critical issues there was to not talk about skills and craft in the sense of, *what are the technologies that I need to master to achieve certain ends?* But instead, say: if I want to work with certain wicked problems in the world, I start with the problems. I start with what I need to understand, and then pick the tools, not before.

**JT:** True. That was something Harri [Laakso] would put it in a very nice way when we started working together: he said we were educating *mindsets*, that UWAS is about mindsets and not necessarily [giving artistic] tools. So, we aren't just telling students: here you go, familiarize yourself with this tool and use it as expected. But rather: meet people from different backgrounds, have discussions with them, encounter them as your colleagues, try to see where your ideas and interests and worldviews come together and where they differ... And after all of this, start thinking: Okay, what could we do together? What kind of tools might we use?

**MV:** Or what kind of language do we need to articulate this? Because it may come from a mix of visions, that language... The very description of the problem may need a new vocabulary.

**JT:** Exactly. And I think that then — and this I found both really challenging and rewarding in UWAS' courses I was teaching or involved with — usually, at the end of the course, we could all admit that *this is hard! Ha ha!..* That it's hard to teach courses like this and to be a student in a course like this... it's hard to pay attention to differences we cannot just “solve” with any “proper tools”, or some sort of “objective” stance to

take together and then just see things “clearly”. Yet when we figure out or realize that we all lacked a shared language or a shared understanding of this big problem or issue we were addressing, in many ways, that might frustrate us. But I think (based on some of the course feedback we received) it also motivated some of our students to realize, “maybe I

should take a second look at what is that I am doing?” Or at what others are doing as well.

**MV:** Definitely. When I reached that point at the end of the course, I saw in some students a sense of... *This is massive! We're just scratching the surface here.* And you felt petite or inexperienced, but, ironically, what I got from students was the appetite for more, you know? It was not a paralyzing feeling of “It’s overwhelming. It’s too complex.” It was *enabling*. The sudden feeling of “I didn’t know I could bring this problem to my table and start opening it up!” Like they could put their hands on it, and do it together.

**JT:** Yes. To really step out of our comfort zones, encounter people, and work together with people whose fields or practices I have no clue about requires so much time. So individual courses become just drops in the sea. And then eventually, you feel well, I’m insignificant! *haha...* But then, going back to the institutional demands and UWAS’s position within the university, while going deeper into this insignificance and acknowledging how difficult it is, at the same time, we had to demonstrate to the leadership that we were actually doing something and what we did had very concrete measurable effects. And then there was the question of scaling: What kind of scales could we inhabit in a work like this. My point always was that we can scale up some of our courses, but we cannot really scale the whole unit, because then it becomes something else... it defeats the purpose and pedagogical aims of the whole unit.

**MV:** If you want this tightly knit fabric of students thinking a problem through, you cannot achieve that with fifty people. Or you have to do

the trick of splitting them into groups and all these logistics just to get a conversation going amongst them. Scaling up for the sake of scaling up, and fast-tracking results continue to be a puzzling thing about capitalism. I mean, it's an issue of values here.

We discussed with Juuso how in this program we were working precisely with the slow food economy, where knowledge takes time, and finding a direction north in your discipline or your professional life takes time. *And it's worth taking it.* So UWAS's stakes had to do with quality, not scale. In the early days, when Juuso articulated what the Art and Creative Practices Initiative was about, quality of education was at the center: art could bring something across the university that could create room for rethinking public space, communities, and forms in which knowledge may circulate and be shared. *That was* the road for the university to go to the next frontier of higher education.

This was a feature UWAS shared with the old Pori, TaiK, and Arabia master's visions: it aimed for small student groups and stronger, deep learning processes. And as the UWAS' courses became popular, groups stayed small. But the incoming leadership wanted to scale it up or close it down and move on to the next "new thing". UWAS was able to increase the number of courses (hourly-paid teachers are not expensive), and so did the student registrations. But, of course, that still didn't fit with the notion of massive access to ready-made knowledge that suits science, business, or technical education. It was not "efficient". And after five years in operation, it was certainly not "new". And for the future-oriented, utilitarian narrative of this leadership, *those two arguments were enough.*

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## THE DEMANDS AND PITFALLS OF TRANSDISCIPLINARY WORK

I believe UWAS did help redefine academia and research momentarily for the past five years, but it was tough to do. For one thing, it offered challenging, unsettling questions to BA and BS students as they lay their professional foundations on something reliable within a discipline. So transdisciplinary experimental learning spaces gave great freedom, but that required way more responsibility and initiative from students than an average bachelor's course would, let alone the countless easy-credit electives of regular curriculums. Amongst the many

business initiative was about, quality of education was at the center: art could bring something across the university that could create room for rethinking public space, communities, and forms in which knowledge may circulate and be shared. *That was the road for the university to go to the next frontier of higher education.*

challenges, managing students' expectations was a significant one: UWAS didn't fare well with the logic of the elective as a "filler" or a "rest" from the "important stuff", yet it didn't have the attainment reward of the compulsory studies. It was hard to stay in one of these courses, and there was a low threshold to give up: the high-stakes of method and topics could feel baffling to some students as much as they were inspiring and rewarding for many others. At the same time, the methods constantly disrupted the individualist study/work ethic of mainstream education, which was important but hard to trust (or unlearn) for many.

UWAS was giving an entry point to artistic thinking and art and design skills for many students. But not just that. It was offering the gift of epistemic and ethical earthquakes, and in that way, the rough terrains of its courses were rehearsals of everyday-life contemporary dilemmas that demand professionals capable of navigating complexity: they provided priceless cultural, technical, political, and epistemological puzzles. And many students loved sorting them together.

**JT:** When the 2015-2022 strategy was reaching its end, UWAS's precarious position within the university became more concrete. After all, the whole unit was running on strategic funds from the university. And when the new strategy omitted the words "art" and "design" when discussing creativity, we realized we're not safeguarded by strategy documents anymore. One possible solution might have been to become an "integration" unit a bit like Aalto Ventures Program; that is, to offer course contents that could be easily integrated in existing courses. However, while integrating elements of design thinking or creativity in existing courses may be efficient in many ways –for example, you don't have to develop new courses from scratch– I see that it can narrow the pedagogical potential of art and design in multi-, cross-, or transdisciplinary collaborations. At worst, it can lead to a situation where art-based education becomes merely a stamp that, on paper, makes it appear that students in all disciplines are taught various contents, but that these contents are not expected to induce any genuine change in courses or curriculum.

That's why I think that the, as you said, "slow food" approach to learning

we had in UWAS puts art-based education in a precarious position because you never can really deliver it in a neat, ready-made package. Transdisciplinarity, as I understand it, requires both course planning and curriculum planning that is transdisciplinary right from the beginning. It's not about inventing new labels, but really changing education.

In a way, UWAS also served to put in focus a particular form of schizophrenia of many universities today: torn between the pressure for results and the appeal of open-ended research processes. While teachers may be very interested in

experimental pedagogies to negotiate values and open-up discussions across fields of knowledge and practice, the competitive environment pushing them to advance disciplines, publish, show the applicability of outcomes, and secure funding is colossal. This is not exclusive to education. It is a tough dilemma in the field of research today, and a complex challenge any transdisciplinary project faces (e.g. [Thompson 2017](#)[4]). But inhabiting transdisciplinarity is equally rewarding, both for advancing knowledge and understanding of wicked problems —e.g., climate change, environmental justice, ethical data management, gentrification, immigration, colonization, and the like—. Because faced with these problems plagued with complexity, with major consequences, where human and technical issues are intertwined, understanding is only possible in the liminal spaces between disciplines and through negotiating the values and positions at stake.

This is also the tension between specialization and open-ended speculative search... one deeply felt by many professionals today. But what do our world and the job market across society need? Narrowly skilled experts or versatile minds able to collaborate? When answering this question with its new *Future-led learning vision*, the kind of flexibility that Aalto has embraced recently is on the wrong side of history: precarity of workers and scholar development, burnout of staff, injecting formulaic ideas of creativity into curriculums, and atomized learning spaces —which are modeled after the “temporary rental” and the “client extracting value at a gig”, instead of grounding communities or supporting longer-term processes—.

But just four years prior, the same university was negotiating the dilemma

quite differently.

**MV:** When it came to this *Sharing and Co-creating Transdisciplinary Artworks* unit that was part of the 2016 strategy, then art entered this space of university label to propose a different way of thinking of how to integrate disciplines and levels of reality. And this is where the *Conversation Room* and UWAS were part of the same family: thinking of exhibitions and public places, or public spaces where art happens, events, and different activities of art happen, as places for learning or

*contact zones* (in the terms proposed by the professor of curating and mediating art back then, Nora Sternfeld) ... this relational space where unforeseeable things can happen, just because it creates the infrastructure for a type of encounter that you cannot control... You can think of what's possible there, but you never know what happens until you enter it. And you never come out of the contact zone the same as you came in, right? I think that's what happens in UWAS courses as well. You don't know what you're stepping into. It should be intriguing enough, and once you enter the process, and go through the process with others, the process kind of changes you.

**JT:** Yeah, exactly. Which sometimes can be very... it can change you in a sort of profound way. Going back to discussions I had with some students I was working with then, I always remember this one engineering student who was part of the UWAS Island Course. During the course, we had asked students to do open-ended exercises, both individually and collectively, and when they presented their work, we teachers discussed the work with the students but did not evaluate them on a numerical scale. At first, this particular student was really, let's say, challenging our ways of teaching. He questioned whether we can actually teach anything if we don't have students competing with each other or if we don't grade students in any ways. But in the reflection he sent afterward, he told that he had moved to tears when he got back home since the course had such an intense experience of being... or having a different approach to learning; an approach completely different from what he had been taught (he was just about

completely different from what he had been taught (he was just about to finish his master's, and he was doing some really technical stuff). He even said that courses like this one should be obligatory for all our students!

It is ultimately up to students and teachers to use the current infrastructure for meaningful teaching, learning, and research. The many remarkable practitioners that are part of this university and those who join it, inspired by alumni and the hard-working Art and Design faculty that stick around today, will do it one way or another.

## FAREWELL UWAS, AND HOLD ON

One could hardly be surprised about the fallout of UWAS and the varied cuts of the 2021 renewal portfolio. In a university increasingly driven by technocratic logic, neoliberal shortcuts, and utilitarian assumptions (when not subservient to the interests of local industries and markets), what could be the motives driving a “collaboration” with Arts in the long term? As the leadership has changed, the vision has dramatically shifted, and priorities are different than they were in 2016. The pressure to graduate people in record time has taken over as a standalone indicator of optimization of resources—a larger and faster output of graduates equated with doing things well.[5] As of fall 2022, MA students have lost even the thesis examination sessions, a milestone moment for arts graduate studies where we all have learned to present our work and debate it with knowledgeable reviewers and peers. *Debate? Who needs that? It's too stressful. No time or money for that either.*

How have the interests of the art sector been negotiated in the last decade while reducing operative costs (cutting down studios, cramming researchers and teachers in smaller offices), forcing a public university to rent its own facilities to keep every square meter “productive”? These are troubling questions, particularly when Aalto has decided that artistic research does not contribute to its Key Performance Indicators (KPI)—that is, the implicit public declaration that Aalto does not regard artistic research as academic production in its own right.

How have the actual needs and long-term goals of artistic education and research been promoted and advanced by the leadership to ensure the quality of the education? What are the realistic prospects for delivering on that quality indicator in the quadrennial that has started under the label of *Radical Creativity*? Ironically, Aalto still presents itself as an international leader in education based on its multidisciplinary portfolio. A new project launched in 2021, the “Co-education (ACE) team” is supposedly fulfilling that dream by initiating these

educator (ACE) team” is supposedly fulfilling that dream by injecting these “strategic cross-cutting themes, sustainable development, radical creativity and an entrepreneurial mindset into teaching” ([Aalto 2021](#)). But are these just labels? A year into the strategy implementation, the notion of “radical creativity” is still a joker card thrown around happily as the new face of change, without any substantial content or clear impact on learning environments or practices. The 30+ UWAS courses students loved have been replaced, ironically, with more inflexible rules for them to complete credits in record time and ice-cold corporate silence in response to their demonstrations.

Of course, it is ultimately up to students and teachers to use the current infrastructure for meaningful teaching, learning, and research. The many remarkable practitioners that are part of this university and those who join it, inspired by alumni and the hard-working Art and Design faculty that stick around today, will do it one way or another. They will make it happen despite the autocratic directives. It is up to people’s initiative and interest, always, to choose how to exercise their right to public education personally and collectively. However, UWAS is the perfect evidence of how the frames imposed and the resources made available to an academic community matter, they matter a great deal.

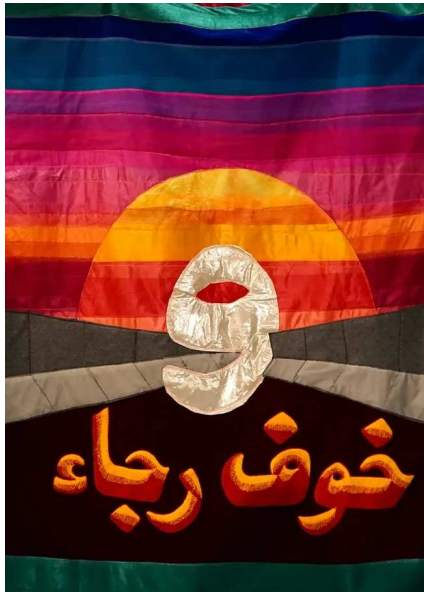
We went on discussing with Juuso that day how different values mean completely different outcomes on different scales. In a funny loop, that took us back to the reform of public education in 2010 in Finland, when, as Aalto was being assembled, Finnish legislators decided that state-owned universities could adopt the model of private foundations and stop operating as public institutions. That is when they were first handed over to corporate business logic.

**MV:** When you said before that tools could be used for all kinds of things, I was thinking: *Not just all kinds of purposes, but they can be used with different values too.* What happens with a tool depends very much on the intentions of the person grabbing it... For instance, higher education as a tool. What are the values that are driving education, as a tool? You can do all kinds of things with it.

1. See an overview of the thriving Pori program back then, by Anne Venäläinen, Nov. 2014, "[Teaching Laboratory](#)" In *Mustekala* (in Finnish).
2. Tavin, K., Tervo, J., & Löytönen, T. (2018). "Developing a Transdisciplinary University in Finland through Arts-Based Practices". In T. Chemi, & X. Du (Eds.), *Arts-based Methods and Organizational Learning: Higher Education Around the World* (pp. 241-264). Cham: Springer Nature
3. See Aalto's short note on its [history](#); and also [Wikipedia](#) and [Helsingin Sanomat](#) for the public debate and large mobilization of the academic community against the merger imposed by the university board, back in 2007.
4. Thompson, Mary Anne et al. 2017. "Scientist and Stakeholder Perspectives of Transdisciplinary Research: Early Attitudes, Expectations and Tensions." In *Environmental Science and Policy* 74, pp 30-39.
5. See how Aalto presents its recent accomplishments [here](#), and [here](#).

**Varya Yakovleva** is an artist, illustrator, animator based in France. She has participated in over forty group exhibitions, and has had four solo exhibitions. She's the art-director of a full-length animated film *The Nose or the Conspiracy of Mavericks* and the director of animation shorts such as *The Square», Anna, Cat and Mouse, Life Is a Bitch, Oneluv*. She's an illustrator of books, and collaborates with several publishers and magazines.

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20 yes, we have the most the revolution is excluding men. next 'woman'; or it may seem distinct in different contexts and very different parts of Europe. Despite these differences, we almost



the hardship of her forefathers. Also's ancestral past, including new. These works reference paintings look both ancient and



last amount of consumed cultural hegemony within the permanence of US-American mass cultures? Or even the permanence of US-American

When I reflected on the works from Speed Records, I questioned if there was supposed to be an element of parody. Was the use of the candy-colored paint intentional to comment on the glorification of US mass consumerism, specifically within the subculture of motorsports? Many works were created out of resin; was this to comment on the permanence of US-American mass cultures? Or even the permanence of US-American cultural hegemony within the last amount of consumed

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immediately find a common  
language. In our discussion, we  
define it as the language of  
places. Working as a black  
man in northern Finland, it is a  
rare opportunity to have a tête-  
à-tête with my elders. It can even  
be hard to recognize my elders.  
Sonia called it systemic misogyny,  
how our environments erase our  
lines and make us think we  
are alone.

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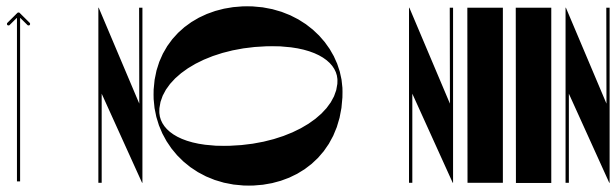
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