

Why we developed the *Graduate School for Moving Images: Analog Realities, Digital Materialities (GBB)* at the Kunsthochschule Kassel

Joel Baumann, Jan Peters, and I came up with the *Graduate School for Moving Images: Analog Realities, Digital Materialities* as a pilot project so that we could take part in defining what a postgraduate research context could be at an art school. Or more precisely: we did it to develop an alternative model to a practice-based PhD at art schools. Part of the structure and aspiration of the *GBB* is for the postgraduates themselves to participate in shaping it. They are not paid for this, but they do determine what happens. Academic contexts in German-speaking countries are deeply hierarchical. This is particularly the case for universities, but it also applies to art schools and art academies. We implemented the involvement of the participants in the *GBB* because we were disturbed by this devotion to hierarchy within academic contexts and the debasement that goes along it. And the more we witnessed the intertwinings of a neoliberal shirking of responsibility and authoritarian gestures in many areas of life, the more this bothered us.

Art schools first started attaining university status in Germany in 1999—previously they were either academies or colleges [*Hochschulen*]. With the adoption of the so-called *Bologna Declaration*,¹ which aimed to unify university systems across the EU, the economic and educational spheres were fused with one another (today we call this cognitive capitalism)². This unification also meant that the triple structure of bachelor, masters, and PhD that is common in the English-speaking world would now be generally applicable (with few exceptions, usually at art schools). Since then there have been discussions and debates about the question of what art and design-based doctorates and PhDs at art and design schools could be. What is certain is that new parameters began to prevail following the *Bologna Declaration*. For art schools this means that many of their traditional structures, forms, conventions, vocabularies have been suppressed or overwritten by academic forms and protocols that are now considered universal (and these are the protocols of an economic model of dominance and not of one that is critical of such dominance). Before *Bologna* there was the “development and promotion of the arts” [*Entwicklung und Erschließung der Künste*], there were *Meisterschüler*innen* [“Master’s student”, a postgraduate honorary status specific to German art schools], classes, annual exhibitions, and long periods of study. Since 1999 there is artistic research, although what this term means remains controversial, nebulous, and unclear, and its ascendancy has been accompanied by the necessity and opportunity to define the third phase at an art school.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, art schools have been increasingly developing doctoral programs, and the experiences with these programs have been ambivalent. Participants who invest many years in their training as artists and designers are required to ensure that more

¹ “The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999: Joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education”: https://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/1999_Bologna_Declaration_English_553028.pdf (accessed: Dec. 3, 2025)

² More on art as a function of the global economy of knowledge and especially on the career of the term ‘artistic research’ can be found in Tom Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself: Contemporary Art’s Epistemic Politics*. Berlin 2020.

than half of their doctoral work satisfies standards of academic research and writing. At the same time, those who deal with materiality all agree that different materials provoke and demand different thought processes. When standing in front of a lump of clay, knowing how to make proper academic citations doesn't get me very far. If you are reading this, and you, like me, are someone who works with text, researches, or works in university administration, then please imagine that you would have three years' time to turn this lump of clay into something that would hold up in the professional discourse of contemporary art to the same degree that a dissertation is expected to hold up in its academic disciplinary field. This amounts to requiring a double qualification from artists and designers, the greater part of which also consists in dismissing everything these people have developed over decades in their field. For according to the higher education declaration, this skill alone is not a sufficient qualification for a doctorate.

When asking why people with an artistic or design practice would pursue an artistic or design-based doctorate, three reasons are mentioned above all: the hope for better employment opportunities, or more concretely, for a life above the poverty level; the wish for access to institutional resources (workshops, libraries, other academic resources); and the wish to enter into interdisciplinary exchange with others in a group. The first point is more than justified in light of the enormously difficult financial circumstances awaiting those who pursue art and design-based careers, but unfortunately, even an art doctorate is no guarantee of steady income. The other two reasons, however, could potentially be accommodated, we told ourselves when we came up with the *GBB*. Furthermore, we had our own motivations. We want to work with postgraduate students because they can also help us as we continue to develop both ourselves and the institution. For one thing, we learn from their research projects, and moreover they also help us in explaining to younger students what the notion of research might mean in their contexts.

The fact that the *GBB* is still a pilot project also means that it is not yet financially secure. The *Kunsthochschule Kassel* is a partially autonomous institution belonging to *the University of Kassel*. We hope and strive to clarify the significance of this existing postgraduate program to the university administration, and to convince them to support it symbolically, politically, and financially. And we hope for actions that would further the following statement from the Academic Council [*Wissenschaftsrat*, WR]: "The WR appeals to the *Länder* to support the colleges of art and music in strengthening their postgraduate phase. To this effect, a select number of sites should establish graduate schools by means of initial funding and maintain well-proven structures in the long run."³

Text by Johanna Schaffer, translated from German by Daniel Hendrickson

³ Wissenschaftsrat, "Recommendations on the Postgraduate Phase of Qualification at Colleges of Art and Music." 9029-21_Summary, Cologne 24 04 2021, 11.
https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/2021/9029-21_Summary.pdf (accessed: Dec. 2, 2025)