



ÅBÄKE

A sea of learning

interview by

GABRIELLE KENNEDY

Biennials can be like fireworks. They burn bright, hold their audience's attention and then disappear into the night sky. Jumping out of that loop, Jan Boelen, curator of the last edition of the Istanbul Design Biennial, proves that the deceptively simple questions behind his *A School of Schools* concept have international legs and a longer life that doesn't belong on the shelf. From the end of June to September, a broad selection of participating projects will be restaged at Z33 in Belgium. DAMN's editor spoke to åbäke, one of those taking part, and delved further into its fishy learning project.

When a biennial takes a road trip it can often be a case of rewind and repeat. This is not the case for *A School of Schools*. The simple question that Jan Boelen, also artistic director of Z33, now poses is: 'Where do you learn about the impact of design on your daily life?' The answer might be obvious, 'Not only in schools or academic institutes because design itself can serve as a practice of knowledge production,' but this nerve-hitting repositioning has breadth and depth.

The transdisciplinary graphic design studio åbäke has embraced this second coming. In Istanbul its Fugu Okulu (Fugu School) project featured in the Currents Schools strand, but the intention was always to develop it beyond the timeframe of the Biennial. Its school, or educational environment, is devoted to fugu fish, a rare poisonous species native to Japan that mysteriously began appearing off the coast of Turkey in 2003. The official and scientific account given for the rogue migrants' appearance was 'global warming' and the reaction in Turkey was to immediately brand the fish, a delicacy in Japan, an invasive species.

åbäke's proposal is a progressive, more transdisciplinary approach to exploring and under-

standing phenomenon such as the fugu's passage to create a more complex conversation, which in an era of populist politics and cemented borders seems more urgent than ever. åbäke calls it 'Suitcase Schooling' and it entails engaging creatives from all disciplines – architects, chefs, ethicists and linguists – in an associative-thinking education model. Practically speaking it means having experts congregate around a single issue to deconstruct it into all its potential revelations and melodies.

Gabrielle Kennedy: What has fugu got to do with design education?

åbäke: In 2017 I was in Cyprus and discovered that fugu had somehow made its way into the Mediterranean. Apparently it is due to global warming and as fish do not have borders, they made their own route – via the Suez Canal.

GK: So the migrating fugu was like a species invasion?

åbäke: Yes. And it gets complicated because it's a protected species, but also considered dangerous to the ecosystem. But imagine if we had school that alongside a general curriculum of science, business or English, you could also choose fugu as a course.



Transdisciplinary graphic design collective åbäke
Photo: Stéphanie Demyttaere



GK: Fugu?

åbåke: Yes. Through fugu and all that has happened to it, you could learn about biology, architecture, geography, philosophy, food, the environment, politics, society... with fugu at the centre we can go in so many directions.

GK: So you embrace phenomena as always ultimately connected?

åbåke: If we choose an everyday object such as a nail, one could talk a lot about what might relate to it. For example, the fugu made me think of the link between Istanbul and Japan. Then I realised Istanbul is twinned with Shimonoseki, which is the Japanese capital of fugu. It made me wonder whether a fish close to Japan had developed a relationship with the language. I mean people speak to cats in all languages and they seem to 'understand'. Then I wondered about the Turkish language, which is relatively recent and results from a decision by Atatürk to choose between the East and the West. Language is a strong key to culture, but also to power. This associative thinking leads to so many fields.

But back to fugu... think about people moving around – just moving around doing nothing more than just moving around, not establishing countries or borders. And everyone goes crazy. In the meantime fish are doing that. Just moving around. And everyone still goes crazy.

GK: So tell me more about the curriculum of this fugu course?

åbåke: It starts with architecture and the Suez Canal – law, war and territory. Then there is discussion about the ethics of animals, humans and their overlap. I will need a chef,

an anthropologist, a biologist, someone working on toxins and cancer research.

GK: So the proposal is really about looking at education in a more holistic way?

åbåke: Yes, and more than just that it takes an opposing position on the Anthropocene. Everything now is supposedly human-centric, but I think more and more people challenge this notion. We need to seek out a less egocentric position for human creation – one that values connections between man and nature as a more desirable co-operation on the path for progress. Consider the difference between ego where man is at the centre, and eco where man is only one part of the ecosystem. Think of it both in terms of how you think we live, but also how you think we should live. Donna Haraway [Distinguished Professor Emerita in the History of Consciousness Department and Feminist Studies Department at the University of California] has written about the Capitalocene and the Chthulucene.

GK: I read her piece on e-flux. Her point is that the discourse around the Anthropocene saps our capacity for imagining and caring for other worlds.

åbåke: Yes... It is limited to a hierarchical connection between humans and the Earth, but that is very closed and so limits our understanding of what is happening. Haraway used an octopus to describe what is needed, a system that is open with many tendrils that is full of possibilities.

GK: OK, so what are you exhibiting at Z33?

åbåke: Taxidermy, posters, graffiti, images, words. Objects that communicate this more

open way of understanding and learning about the world. The displays come from museums and schools such as animal parts and science posters. The form borrows partly from graffiti, another sort of invasive species.

GK: Are you into graffiti?

åbåke: When I visited Sao Paulo I received a shock, seeing the pixação, a form I had never seen and so raw. In graffiti you always look at how people got there or how tall they are, you can see their arm span. In Sao Paulo I believed they could fly.

GK: Where did you get the posters you did graffiti on from?

åbåke: I stole them.

GK: So you deface stolen posters?

åbåke: Yes, but they are of people I admire in the mainstream such as Haim, Beyoncé, Janelle Monáe and Vivienne Westwood. It is difficult to deface something one admires, but it is more important to learn how to unlearn. Also, I had a great collaborator, LPPL, who helped me to deface most of the posters. She is a great person to work with.

GK: I guess we have to keep creating to keep moving, but a lot of acceptance of the status quo is necessarily wrapped up in that approach.

åbåke: It's like the fish in the Mediterranean, you can't just kill them all. We are always moving on from what is comfortable to survive.

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A School of Schools
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Co-curators: Nadine Botha
and Vera Sacchetti
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z33.be