

Shop-Around Worries About Illustration Students

How should De Kooning illustration students be prepared for the market?

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Introduction. The objective of this article is to evaluate 3 aspects in the education of illustrators and to introduce a new form of research lab (*Station*) at the Willem de Kooning Academy (WdKA) in Rotterdam. The article is a response to concerns about the education of illustrators by Bert Dijkstra during the portfolio evening in at the WdKA. Dijkstra is owner of Shop-Around; a Rotterdam based creative production agency that specializes in: “*contemporary illustration, graphic design, animation, motion graphics and interactive design*” (shop-around.nl). Dijkstra is afraid that there’s gap between what is taught at Dutch art academies and the global context in which illustration it is practiced. In the publication: “*The Fundamentals of Illustration*”, Zeegen also claims that art education is often criticized for: “*being unaware of commercial realities and constraints*” (2005). In this article aspects of three of Dijkstra’s concerns are evaluated and the new WdKA Stations are introduced. The assumption is that the WdKA Stations might offer solutions to Dijkstra’s concerns.

1. Illustration styles. Dijkstra’s first concern is that illustration students place too much emphasize on one signature illustration style. Having a visual style or identity as an illustrator is important. However, students should also be aware that no matter how appealing and refined their style may be, some styles are unlikely to result in enough commissions to make a living (Dijkstra, 2014). Another problem with too much focus on one style is that like fashion: it can simply go out of style (Brazell&Davis, 2013; Dijkstra, 2014; Zeegen, 2012).

In the article: “*The Anarchy of Style*”, Davis makes a distinction between fashion and style. He claims anyone can copy fashion well or bad, but it will only be fashion. Illustration can be made fashionably good, and become fashionably popular, but in the end style is considered very personal and complex (2014). Having a wide range of illustration styles is not recommended either. In the publication “*How to be an Illustrator*”, Rees wonders why one would hire an illustrator who can do a little bit of everything when you can ask a solo-style specialist as well? Rees recommends illustrators to focus at the most on two different styles. He claims it’s difficult to obtain more than two distinct styles that are both original and consistent (2012).

It’s hard to find conclusive answers about styles for Illustration students. Every choice seems to have its own type of risk (Brazell&Davis, 2013; Dijkstra, 2014; Rees, 2012; Zeegen, 2012). Furthermore Dijkstra’s perception of Illustration students focusing on one style might be true. However it remains to be seen if this implies that these students won’t be flexible enough in the professional world. For

professional illustrators the topic of styles seems less complex. If you can't sell enough work in your style of illustrations, you will have to change.

2. Market research. Dijkstra's second concern is that illustration students spend too little time researching what's going on in the market. He finds it surprising because there's so much opportunity to get informed nowadays. For example Shop-Around organizes design-theme events at Pakhuis de Zwijger in Amsterdam. He also recommends the Dutch Playground festival in Amsterdam/Tilburg, and Pictoplasma in Berlin. He wonders why he seldom meets students at these occasions. If they don't want to leave the house there are also portfolio websites such as behance.net where the latest trends in illustration can be found (Dijkstra, 2014). Given the openness of communication and the accessibility of illustrators via their websites; it has even become easier to contact them directly (Brazell&Davis, 2013).

However the 'modern-day' accessibility of information also raises questions; *"How much information is enough?"* and *"when does the search become a form of procrastination?"*. WdKA illustration alumni Wouter Tulp thinks it's a great time for art students because *"they have access to online instructions, resources and knowledge one mouse click away"*. However Tulp also sees many artists struggling because the continuous exposure to amazing artwork can also lead to insecurity and become demotivating. Art students should prevent becoming what he calls: *'slaves to the internet'* (Tulp, 2014). It's important not to let trends take over your own originality. Be aware of what other illustrators are doing, but don't let it get to you (Snoad, 2013; Tulp, 2014).

In the end it seems obvious that market research is important for illustration students. However there seems to be a more important question that needs to be addressed first: *"What is good market research for illustrators?"*. If illustrators don't know what's good for them; they could end up in a wild goose chase. This shows the importance of teaching illustration students on how to conduct good and effective research.

3. 3D skills. Dijkstra's third concern is about the lack of 3D-computer skills by Dutch illustrators. He claims you don't have to be a scientific researcher to realize that the illustration market has an increasing demand for illustrators with 3D-computer skills. Perhaps we don't always like how these products look, but maybe that's just because illustrators haven't shown us all of its possibilities yet (Dijkstra, 2014). For example the game-market has increased enormously which has resulted in an increased demand for digital orientated illustrators (Fleishman,2004).

WdKA illustration alumni and Art Director at Guerilla games Misja Baas says a lot of the 3D-design for their production of the game Killzone is being outsourced. Some of it to large Chinese outsource studios with dedicated design- and production departments. Baas was one of the few students who got excited about the MAYA-3D computers at the WdKA some 20 years ago. At that time very few students knew how to work with MAYA 3D or wanted to work with it. One of the difficulties with the earlier 3D programs was the complexity of the tools. You can't make illustration students love 3D-computer programs, but the tools nowadays are getting easier to play with, and equally important, easier to come by. Baas recommends students who have an interest to experiment with Google Sketchup. It's relatively easy and it's free. Many designers at Guerilla Games are using it (Baas, 2014).

Former Pixar illustrator John Nevarez says it became essential for him to learn 3D-(computer) skills some years ago. Nevarez doesn't consider himself to be a 3D-designer, but he sees the 3D-programs as a valuable time saving tool when constructing complex illustrations. For example while working for Pixar studios it was useful to use a 3D- programs to design German-look-a-like cities for the animation of Cars. The ability to play with lights and viewpoints, by creating rough shapes in a 3D- mock up, makes it much easier and faster to create complex naturalistic looking background illustrations. His basic 3D-mock ups would not be seen in the final illustrations (Nevarez, 2014).

The advice to illustration students by both Baas and Nevarez is not to worry about ethics when using 3D-computer tools to make the process easier. They describe that some students don't find it ethical to work with design tools that make the process easier. However they both declare that nobody in the market cares if you design purely by imagination or if you use reference materials or 3D-computer tools. Students should always feel free to use any means necessary to get the desired results, especially if it can save valuable time" (Baas, 2014; Nevarez, 2014).

WdKA Stations. The WdKA has started with a redesigned curriculum for Art & Design education in September 2014. Part of this new curriculum is the implementation of Stations. A Station can be seen as a multidisciplinary design research 'lab'. It's a place where students, teachers, and instructors work and research together. The Stations provide knowledge and expertise in: software, hardware, skills and machines. Currently the WdKA has seven different Stations: Interaction, Image & sound, Publication, Material, Fabric, Drawing, and Business. A difference between the Stations and the former traditional workplaces is that stations are not only about technique and machines, but Stations are also engaged in research and offer open educational programs for all art and design students.

For example the Business Station has an open and online platform. It offers both students, professional Illustrators, designers and fine artists tools like the 'creative business map' to learn about market opportunities (Beards&Suits.nl, 2014). The Image & Sound Station offers open instructional courses in 3D-computer Design and Rendering. The interaction station offers an opportunity to experiment with relatively new 3D related Design technologies such as: Oculus Rift, Google glass, and Kinect.

The Stations are open 5 days a week, and there are always teachers and instructor available to assist. Students get in touch with the stations through their major/minor studies, but Station instructors and teachers offer help with individual student projects as well (Study brochure WdKA, 2014-2015). It remains to be tested if the Stations will have the desired effect on students, but in relation to the concerns expressed by Dijkstra the Stations at least offer specific programs to assist the illustration students.

Conclusion

It remains difficult to provide any conclusive answers on the concerns raised by Dijkstra. In most cases it appears that students will have to be able to find and maintain a delicate balance. They should focus on their style, but not let it become fashion. They should research the market, but not be overwhelmed by it and end up snow blind. They should follow their heart when it comes to 3D-computer technology, but not be afraid to try new tools. It's hard to say if the implementation of the Stations at the WdKA will play a significant role in solving any of these

concerns. However the intention of the Stations is to present students in a new way with knowledge and expertise. At least there is information accessible for all multidisciplinary students. If they know what they want; the WdKA has a new place where students can get it.

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