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Research Strategy

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I. Research Topics

The Faculty of Cultural Sciences investigates historical as well as contemporary artefacts and deals with the human-designed lifeworld from different theoretical, conceptual and methodological perspectives. An artefact is understood as any object, place, or system that is subject to human intervention and located in a cultural context. The research interests of the faculty focus equally on both physical and digital artefacts. Accordingly, artefacts include entanglements of objects, materialities, and cultural and social practices. Researchers at the faculty address the development, design, production, and change as well as the preservation, protection and research of artefacts in an increasingly inter- and transdisciplinary as well as international dialogue: The Köln International School of Design (KISD) investigates practices of artefact design and materialization by focusing on their socio-cultural relevance and transformative potential, the Cologne Game Lab (CGL) explores virtual and interactive artefacts as media (e.g., video games, VR experiences, as well as artistic experiments), and the Cologne Institute of Conservation Sciences (CICS) explores conservation strategies and the social significance of material cultural heritage. The faculty considers artefacts as embedded in cultural, aesthetic, and social practices and processes (e.g. in a museum context), thus emphasizing their „madness.“ This perspective in turn, offers numerous points of contact for similar research interests at other faculties of TH Köln.

At the faculty, historical-analytical perspectives are intertwined with technical-material practices; humanities and natural sciences are merged in order to make them productive for the realizations of (game) designers and restorers/conservators. Design is not only understood as the production of new artefacts but also as their modification or restoration. As a result of the close connection between scientific investigation and design practices which is elementary for the work in all three institutes, aesthetic practice plays a central role as an object and method of cultural studies research. Aesthetics is understood in a broader, non-normative sense as a form of impact of sensual experience of artefacts and work with artefacts. Design practices are understood as cultural techniques of inter- and transdisciplinary exchange. These include, for example, drawing, modeling, writing, programming but also other methods that are developed during the exploration of new subject areas.

Aesthetic practice, however, includes not only artistic-creative practices but also practices in different contexts and discourses of everyday life and popular culture. The observation and research of preservation, for example, allow us to trace the manifold dimensions and contexts of social developments, to influence them in a lasting way and thus also to have a non-academic impact. Within their disciplinary focus, the institutes of the faculty respond to the rapidly changing demands of society by addressing central issues of the present, not least with regard to the preservation of our material and immaterial past. For this purpose, researchers of the faculty mobilize their national and international research network in numerous projects.

A strong diversity of research interests has developed from these projects. The faculty has set itself the goal to further expand already established institute-specific research sites, such as the project „Echtzeitstadt | Real Time City“ as well as existing media-theoretical, creative-practical and artistic-experimental research projects on topics such as VR and AR in the mediation practice of museums or games in education. The faculty also supports the cross-faculty research focus „Digitale Technologien und Soziale Dienste“, studies on degradation processes within material structures or the cross-university investigation of anthropomorphic changes in works of culture. Likewise, the faculty seeks to further develop existing overlaps of interest into research fields within the framework of joint projects. To this end, a faculty research day was established in 2018. Efforts in this regard have been intensified since the establishment of the position of a scientific coordinator of research at the faculty in April 2022.

The faculty plans to bring together previously unconnected strands of research on „memory artefacts“ in a joint collaborative project at the institutes for which third-party funding is to be obtained in the medium term as part of the “Research Impulse” funding of the German Research Foundation (DFG) – for more information on „third-party funding“, please see below.

II. Research Concept

The faculty's understanding and ways of designing artefacts makes it necessary to abandon the often-postulated separation between cultural studies and the STEM subjects, without in turn blurring the specific contours of the cultural studies. The research practices of the faculty's institutes have a broad inter- and transdisciplinary horizon including research perspectives from other faculties of TH Köln, such as architecture, social sciences, material sciences, computer science, the natural sciences which are already at home at the faculty, or linguistics.

Instead of perceiving basic research and applied research as opposites, the faculty is characterized by a process-oriented understanding of research and an application orientation in basic research. Application potentials often develop in the course of the research process and sometimes in directions not foreseeable beforehand. This includes basic research because it is often necessary to understand concrete phenomena and to solve problems. Researchers of the faculty are active as editors of scientific articles, journals, selected volumes, and book series. The research culture of the faculty contributes to basic research through (peer-reviewed) publications, not least through an increased use of open access publishing (335 publications issued since 1997, 59 ones were published in open access format) and the sustainable provision of research data based on databases, among other things. The faculty contributes to the spread of the open access idea in its publication culture and transports best practice knowledge to the academic public, e.g. through the planned publication of the new open access „Journal of Integrated Design Research“. The faculty stands for a sophisticated publication culture that experiments with connections between audio-visual and textual elements, thus also contributing to the expansion of scientific presentation possibilities. The faculty works closely with the various departments of TH Köln to further increase this research contribution both qualitatively and quantitatively. In this context, communication to a broader public and a variety of publication methods also play an important role, not only in digital but also in printed form.

In order to interlink basic and applied research, the faculty also makes use of an artistic approach. This happens on three levels: The faculty-specific research of artefacts demands an artistic-creative perceptive ability and an artistic empathy which researchers usually have acquired through several years of practical experience in restoration studios, design studios, the independent art and culture scene, museums, art and cultural institutions, or the creative industries. This explicitly includes a scientific-theoretical approach to products of culture. Finally, the faculty's research uses a specific infrastructure including research laboratories and studios, etc. which is supervised by an artistic-technical or scientifically trained staff.

For a better self-understanding and conceptual development of a cross-institutional concept of research, the faculty established a working group in the summer semester 2022, held World Cafés for researchers, and introduced a joint faculty lecture series. The continuous conceptual work within the framework of these formats makes overlaps and differences visible within the faculty. Knowledge of these differences in turn is a central prerequisite for embedding research at the institutes in an overarching culture of cultural studies. The goal of the newly introduced formats is to develop a common concept of research that opens up a theoretical-methodological vocabulary for the analysis and design of artefacts. This should increase the chances for intra- and extra-university cooperation and for the successful acquisition of joint third-party funding.

Along with non-academic partner institutions, the faculty makes an important contribution to the transfer of cultural studies research to non-academic areas. Transfer is understood as a process of translation by the researcher of the faculty. However, it is rather the dynamics of cultural, material and medial translation of forms, images or signs across the boundaries of the university than a process of transferring individual texts from one language to another. These translation processes are aligned with an expanded concept of transfer encompassing the productive transfer of ideas, knowledge, and technologies into all areas of society. With partner institutions from education, culture, politics, and business, the faculty practices a broad, reciprocal understanding of transfer and advocates a practice- and material-oriented, transdisciplinary approach that combines scientific knowledge with experiential knowledge.

The faculty sees itself as an actor in projects with the urban and regional public, i.e. cultural institutions, museums, preservation of historical monuments, city administration, etc., e.g. with the independent art and culture scene as well as with the creative industries of the city of Cologne. At the same time, there are numerous connections to other institutions in the Rhineland, such as the Landschaftsverband Rheinland. These cooperations benefit from the fact that the faculty also interacts selectively on a global level in transfer projects. The local, regional and global levels are equally important and intertwined spaces of interaction for the production and transfer of knowledge.

Research and transfer processes are flexibly linked at the faculty with research and teaching research projects as well as dissertation projects. The faculty's diverse connections to public and private institutions promote research projects in which transfer processes are viewed as complex exchange relationships between the university and actors from civil society, culture, politics, and business. These relationships have a reciprocal effect and shape the respective projects which are also initiated by early career researchers. Through the institutes' websites, exhibitions, and novel mediation formats, such as public pop-up labs, researchers enter into exchange with interested publics. In this way, the faculty wants to strengthen the society's trust in science, while encouraging constructive critical questioning of the faculty's research at the same time. Through forms and formats of participatory science communication, perspectives from civil society in particular are incorporated into faculty research.

III. Research Resources

The research culture of the faculty is supported by university budgets and external third-party funding. Researchers at the faculty solicit international and national funding for their projects. Besides the DFG and the funding programs of the European Union, other funding institutions play an important role, especially the Federal Ministries or the German Academic Exchange Service. In addition, projects are supported by private funding institutions from cultural and economic institutions, e.g. the Volkswagen Stiftung and the RheinEnergie Stiftung. In September 2022, an initial networking and get-to-know-you meeting was initiated with the university's Research and Knowledge Transfer Unit (R5). The intensified communication with the department aims at contributing to the expansion of the research and transfer culture at the faculty and at increasing third-party funding.

The faculty has also used its resources in recent years to strengthen its research culture by increasing the number of doctoral projects. Currently, 27 doctoral projects are supervised across institutes. 10 doctoral degrees have been completed since 2016. Doctoral students generally perform teaching duties at the faculty as research assistants and are involved in academic self-administration. Doctoral students were supported with regard to the specific expectations and experiences of the respective disciplines and the faculty, i.e. through doctoral colloquia in the institutes and through faculty lecture series such as Promovieren? Forschungsperspektiven in den Kulturwissenschaften in the winter semester 2022/23. In addition, the doctoral students use the support and qualification offers of the Graduate Center of TH Köln. Professors of the faculty supervise doctoral projects within the framework of joint research training groups and cooperative procedures with universities in Germany and abroad that are authorized to award doctorates. They are also active as members of the Promotionskolleg NRW in the departments „Bau und Kultur“ and „Medien und Interaktion“. Doctoral projects represent important specific research formats for the faculty because they enable the particularly intensive processing of concrete projects and contribute to the qualification of early career researchers at the same time.

Professors, lecturers, research assistants, and laboratory managers complement the doctoral culture in an important way with teaching research projects that specifically sensitize Bachelor's and Master's students to research. In the future, the faculty aims at interlocking and coordinating doctoral and teaching research projects even more closely, thus enriching the research culture of the faculty with new synergy effects. An important step in this direction is the faculty lecture series planned for the winter semester 2023/24 on the topic of „Lehrforschung / Teaching Research“, for which experiences from other faculties of the TH Köln are appreciated.

The Faculty of Cultural Sciences has set itself the goal of promoting its research culture by applying for further third-party funding. This concerns, first, the acquisition of specific smaller and medium-sized funding contingents from private and public institutions while expanding joint teaching research projects. Second, specific person-related funding for doctoral projects is to be acquired. The scientific coordination of research at the faculty advises interested parties in particular about the new DFG funding line Transfer HAW/FH Plus intended for HAWs. Finally, in the medium term, larger collaborative projects are to be acquired at faculty level. Collaborative third-party funding helps to create new frameworks to improve the research conditions for doctorates and teaching research projects. In preparation for such applications, various networking projects have been planned and initiated at the faculty since the summer semester of 2022, e.g. faculty lecture series, research AG meeting, research day in May 2023, and other networking activities of the scientific research coordination.