

Dear Minister Tiefensee,  
dear Vice President of the Thuringian Landtag Mr. Bergner,  
dear political representatives,  
dear representatives from the ministries,  
dear representatives of Thuringian universities,

dear presidents of our partners from the European University Alliance,

dear Mayor Kirsten,

dear leaders of the city of Weimar and its institutions,  
dear partners and supporters,

dear Ms. Emes

dear Mr. Speitkamp

dear Mr. Beucke,  
dear Mr. Zimmermann,  
dear Mr. Mönning,  
dear Mr. Schulz,  
dear Mr. Gemmeke,

dear colleagues of the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar – and here I refer to all employees of the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar –

dear students,  
dear guests,  
dear all,

It is my great honour and pleasure to be allowed to be here and speak to you today. Although I am not so new here anymore – for those who may have already forgotten, I have been in office since 1 March 2023 – something I myself find sometimes hard to believe, as President of my university, my alma mater.

When I began studying architecture in the spring of 1996 at what was then the University of Architecture and Civil Engineering, I had no intention whatsoever of pursuing a career in higher education. It was already a surprise when I began working as an artistic associate in the Faculty of Media in 2001. When I moved on from this position in 2006 to take on a professorship position at the Academy of Visual Arts in Hong Kong, I had effectively brought the chapter in Weimar to an end. This is not because it would not have been good to work at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar or live in the city, but simply because a new and very different chapter would lead me to new and different places – and these paths did not look like they would bring me back to Thuringia.

And yet now I stand here, about to be officially inaugurated as President of this wonderful institution. Maybe you can understand my incredulity at life's wonderful intricate twists – maybe my experience can even serve as a little inspiration for those who need it right now.

I am all the more pleased that we have come together today to celebrate this symbolic handing over of office together. I am well aware of the trust you are placing in me – first, the members of the University Assembly who elected me, but also the members and affiliates of the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar as a whole, and finally, of course, the State of Thuringia. I want to assure you right from the start that I will hold this office with

humility, respect and responsibility to the best of my ability and knowledge – although I do not wish to hide that I also intend to have a good time in the process. My experience so far over the last few months has given me no reason to believe that I cannot combine these aspirations.

At this point, an outline of my vision for this term would typically follow, describing how I wish to support and develop the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar in its goal of being a place where innovative research and teaching is carried out. And of course, such an outline will come later.

But first, I hope you will allow me a short digression to speak about what prompted me to seek an office like this in the first place. I think this will add a different perspective to the ideas I will discuss later.

## **What drives me?**

Most of you probably don't know that Hong Kong, a city with a population of 7.4 million, now has ten fully-fledged, publicly funded universities, at least three of which are consistently ranked in the top 50 in the world; another two or three rank among the top 100. I was also unaware of this before I moved there. There are also two private full universities, a number of universities of applied sciences, and an impressive network of vocational schools - some of which offer Bachelor degree programmes. I think it's fair to say that Hong Kong has an exceptional and comprehensive education system that is accessible to the general public.

What you more likely noticed, however, were the violent riots that shook Hong Kong from June to November 2019, at which time nearly 2 million people repeatedly took to the streets to demonstrate for government accountability, more participation in political development and, ultimately, for more democracy. Instead of responding to these perfectly legitimate demands in a constructive way, a completely overwhelmed government escalated the situation by enforcing oppressive police action. In the end, after five months of near civil war-like conditions, the Legislative Council Complex and five university campuses were heavily vandalised, more than 30,000 tear gas grenades fired, more than 6,000 arrests made, and about 10 people killed. The reaction from China was to impose a new national security law on its Special Administration Region in July 2020. Since then, the law has since consistently suppressed any form of protest, criticism, or expression of opinion that is not acceptable.

What has been bothering me since this experience is the role that universities played – or didn't play – in all phases of this conflict, which has been openly and visibly ongoing since the first wave of protests in at least 2010. Instead of taking on the role of institutions of empowerment for the citizens – including students – or acting as mediators between the younger generation, society and politics, instead of offering their expertise, methodology and resources and constructively contributing to the debates, the university administrations chose to withdraw to cutting-edge research tasks, tightened their educational mandates or claimed scientific objectivity and the necessary neutrality of public services. They used this to justify not taking responsibility, not interfering, and not doing anything. By doing this, the universities betrayed the younger generation – the students and pupils who were fighting for the future of their society. The universities also ultimately betrayed society as a whole, a society which has now lost fundamental rights such as freedom of press, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. Ironically, they lost their own fundamental values of freedom of research and teaching, which they had previously used as justification for not taking action.

The illustration on the invitation for today's event was created by a former colleague of mine at the Hong Kong Academy of Visual Arts, comic artist and political cartoonist Justin Wong Chiu-Tat. I asked him to visually process our shared experiences over the past few years for today's event.

In November 2021, Justin published an essay titled »Be Water – The New Symbol of Protest« in a Swiss journal. The essay was based on his collection of visual evidence of the protest movement. The essay included cartoon

images that were used by protesters at the time in flyers, stickers and online memes. One of the graphics featured the slogan »Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our time« – written in Chinese, of course.

By sharing this phrase with you here now, I have just made myself liable to prosecution; the public display and dissemination of this slogan is punishable worldwide according to the understanding of the Hong Kong government. It's important for you to know that you have also committed a crime by viewing this phrase, unless you report me to the National Security Police. Failure to report this is considered consent and therefore an act of state disobedience.

After Justin's essay was published – in Switzerland, mind you – a few printed copies found their way to the University Library in Hong Kong and, with considerable delay, to the University administration. In the end, the University knew no other way out than to inform the National Security Police, allegedly to prevent damage to the University. I was in a seminar with Justin when he learned about the report. After a brief moment of silence, he said simply, »I think I need to leave now«, and walked out of the room, made his way to the airport and left Hong Kong forever to avoid possible arrest. Today, he is free, but his life as he knew it until that moment was over.

What I am getting at with the story is that the freedom of teaching and research, freedom of opinion and freedom of speech – which are still guaranteed under Hong Kong Basic Law and are always defended by the universities – are worthless if they are forced to exist in a state of precariousness, insecurity and fear. In the end, it makes no difference whether the fear is politically, economically, socio-culturally or individually based; as long as people do not dare to speak or think what they consider right and important, there is no real »being free«.

Of course, this idea is not new. It was something already discussed by Martin Heidegger, who referred to »negative freedom«, or the »freedom from«, and »positive freedom«, meaning the »freedom to«. I am convinced that universities in particular must be spaces of negative freedom – »freedom from« – in order for positive freedom – »freedom to« – to exist for themselves and others. This is something we have to fight for, even beyond the university and into society at large, because, as the Hong Kong example illustrates, there is no such thing as a separate, protected space for universities alongside society.

We, as university leaders, are responsible for creating and maintaining a sense of being free. Only by doing so can we fully rely – in terms of desired and expected excellence in teaching and research – on creativity, innovation, energy and the commitment of the individual colleagues, staff members and students at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar.

In the words of journalist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Maria Ressa:

»Don't be afraid – if you don't exercise your rights, you will lose them.«

## Transition

Now that this, in my opinion, necessary preface is over, I will return to the traditional inauguration speech. I want to lay out my vision for the future of the University for you - of course, only to leave immediately.

As President, my role cannot, in my opinion, be to enforce my personal vision of the University. This position is not about pursuing my wishes; it should be about working with the institution in order to develop and implement a shared vision for the future of the University.

I have now been in office for over 200 days, and the current Presidium was elected exactly 100 days ago. It would be a bad sign if we hadn't achieved anything in the meantime, if we had not managed to at least start listening to our institution in order to incorporate the expectations, needs, wants and wishes of the University members.

I therefore hope that the ideas you are about to hear are not just my ideas for the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, but ideas that represent a collective proposal made by the University to itself and to the society around us. I do not wish to claim our programme as mine alone and I would like to invite my colleagues from the Presidium to join me on stage at this point:

Dr. Horst Henrici, Chancellor of the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar;

Prof. Dr. Timon Rabczuk, Vice President for Projects and Research;

Dr. Simon Frisch, Vice President of Student and Academic Affairs; and

Dr. Ulrike Kuch, Vice President for Social Transformation.

As your newly elected Presidium, we have been able to gain insight into the University's perspectives through surveys, discussions and debates since June of this year. Based on this, we have – again with the support of various participation formats – created a Kick-Off Programme, which we are using to establish initial priorities for the beginning of our work together.

We have started by identifying five major areas: Education, research, community, organisation and infrastructure. For each of these areas, we have defined three to six objectives, which we anticipate will accompany us throughout our entire period in office. We have also included three to four milestones in each instance that we wish to achieve by the end of 2023. At the same time, we have done our best to ensure that the comprehensive values of sustainability, diversity and digitalisation feature consistently across all areas of our programme.

We know that we can't solve all problems immediately or address all issues with the same amount of attention. Therefore, we are making it our goal to begin certain things by the end of this year, to break free of some deeply entrenched processes and to enter into a broader discussion on our identity and future path. In this way, we want to create momentum that will carry us through our term in office.

And now I could use the rest of my speech to go into detail about the Kick-Off Programme's topics, objectives and milestones, but I don't in fact wish to do that. That's what we have this QR code for, so you can look at the entire Programme.

Instead, for the time being, I will stay up here at cruising altitude and have our Vice President for Social Transformation, Dr. Ulrike Kuch, bring me back down to earth from time to time by asking me questions. In the spirit of transparency, let me say: Ms. Kuch's questions are authentic – but they first came up in a conversational situation before this event.

## **What are we going to do?**

The main objective of our Presidium is that the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar should be a positive and productive space for all of us, where we can live, work, conduct research, teach and learn; it should be somewhere we can develop and maximise our professional and personal potential. This is what we will ultimately be judged by.

The Presidium agrees on this and I expect that this is an approach that we can all share – also beyond the Presidium.

The question is, of course, how – beyond executing small-scale activities and in the face of much more challenging fundamental challenges posed to us as an evolving society – do we do this?

As I explained earlier, an optimal living environment to me is one where I can be as free as possible. When I think about the idea of »being free« in Weimar, Friedrich Schiller inevitably comes to mind. He was always more relatable to me than, for example Goethe. In his 1795 collection »On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters«, I encountered his thought that freedom can only be attained through »beauty«. You can certainly appreciate that I – as a designer – cannot simply ignore this reference: »beauty«, of all things, as a condition of being free.

How did Schiller arrive at this? Building upon Kant's theories, Schiller creates a series of pairings that he understands as fundamental dichotomies in human nature and in society: Necessity and freedom, sensuality and reason, imagination and knowledge, arbitrariness and law, nature and culture. There can be neither a coercive dictate of reason, nor an arbitrariness of the senses. Instead, these opposites – according to Schiller – are connected through »beauty« in that they are unified in absolute being. Humans therefore become an »aesthetic unity«, and it is only in this state that they can be free.

I don't wish to give a Schiller seminar – and I'm not sure that I could – but Schiller's thoughts can perhaps be used as a space for reflection.

An ideal working and living environment must enable being free; for this to happen, the environment must be »beautiful«, that is, it must be in equilibrium, harmoniously incorporating and balancing all of its parts. From my perspective, this implies that running a university is ultimately a design process that requires knowledge, skills and a sensitive design intent to create a state of »beauty«. This means that I believe there the institution has an aesthetic that manifests and is experienced through its structures, processes and communication.

And by the way: dear Minister, Schiller also mentions an »aesthetic state«.

Our goal for the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar should be to make the Bauhaus brand less about the concrete design results of the old Bauhaus and more about the idea of an all-encompassing aesthetic that permeates all aspects of life.

U.K: What »**tools**«, as Schiller refers to them, are available for us at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar to help »improve the political« (9th Letter) – if we want to think beyond »the beautiful in art« and »[directing] the world on which you act towards that which is good« (9th Letter), starting with ourselves?

As some of you may already know, I identify as an »experiential designer«, a designer of experiences. Experiential designs are always embedded in reality. They therefore must be designed dynamically so that they are always able to seamlessly adapt to new circumstances without losing sight of the original concept. This means that individuals are in a state of institutionalised improvisation – I expect you are starting to see the analogy to university operations.

You might think that improvisation is the maximum freedom to do whatever you want. Instead, the theory on improvisation defines four general conditions for improvisation – or freedom? – to function:

Without **structure**, nothing works. Ideally, structures that react dynamically adapt to the requirements of various situations.

**Context:** What are the external requirements? Which contexts require improvisation? Can these be influenced?

People need a **repertoire**, a broad pool of reproducible pieces that have been tested for their effectiveness, each with as many connections as possible that can spontaneously fit into structures in different combinations as needed.

And finally: **Communication**, communication, communication – verbal, body language, medial or in other forms. Whether within the team or with the general public. Communication – actively listening and engaging with others, possibly even »blindly« understanding the other party – is the objective, method, process and result of every improvisation.

I mentioned earlier that I understand leadership as a design task. It seems natural, at least to me, that these improvisational tools be used in our work at the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar to make our members cognitive, sensitive and emotional co-creators through participatory engagement. And our Kick-Off Programme attempts to make coherent use of structure formation approaches, to shape our contextual conditions, our repertoire of institutional possibilities, and our communication.

I ask you to imagine the Presidium turning the bog crank in this graphic.

*Ulrike Kuch (U.K.): Does **individualism** still play a role in **a globalised society** – and how do we as a university deal with this?*

According to Schiller, freedom can only be attained through beauty – and the experience of beauty is fundamentally and always individual and personal. In this sense, freedom requires individual awareness. Similarly, education is also always personal and thus the importance of considering teaching approaches from the perspective of the individual. This means that, as a university, we always have to consider the individual.

However, humanity is currently facing challenges that we can no longer solve individually.

My time in Asia has influenced me in terms of this question; in the West we are often under the impression that Asians sacrifice their individuality in favour of the community. We refer to this, somewhat disrespectfully, as »collectivism«. In reality, however, I experienced it differently; the Chinese, Japanese and Koreans identify as individuals with individual needs in the same way that we do. But the Asian traditions focus much more heavily on the individual as an element integrated into the larger familial, social, political and cosmic whole. While we tend to place importance on the detached individual, the Asian line of thought focusses on the context.

I must admit, I believe a little more Confucius, Mencius or Bruce Lee would do us good sometimes:

Be water, my friend.

*U.K: A question regarding this: What does this imply for cooperation at the University?*

I try to imagine the University community as a network. If I pull down on one line in the network, the points attached to it will also be pulled down – perhaps not quite as far, but definitely down. When I pull up at a certain point, the cords attached to where I pulled are also pulled up.

We should design network structures – like this bamboo scaffolding – together. Networks that stabilise themselves when an abyss opens up below but are ready to take off in reaction to wind from below.

I want to draw your attention to the connections that hold the cords together in this picture. These connections need to be strong enough and flexible enough to withstand upward and downward fluctuations. If

they break, we have, on the one hand, a free cord – or perhaps a free individual – but, on the other hand, we have a hole in the network.

*U.K: Schiller speaks of the »sapere aude« of an »ancient sage« – which he translates to: »Dare to be wise«. What is the role of courage in the future of the Bauhaus-Universität?*

I don't believe that more courage is needed to face the future today than was needed in the past. The future has always been unknown and had to be approached with a minimum degree of courage. Of course, courageous institutions are needed to determine the best possible course for the future. But our University has an immensely privileged position in this struggle: our main clientele is young people. Over 4,000 young students from over 100 countries study at the Bauhaus-Universität. I strongly believe that the courage of this generation is one of the greatest resources of our society. Every day, we experience their impressive strength showing their drive for the future.

What worries me more than a potential lack of »courage« is a lack of »confidence« – a »desperate courage« tends towards the destructive. And this brings us back to the beginning of my speech: in my opinion, »confidence« is synonymous with »freedom from«. Only when we have freed ourselves from the fear of failure, the worry of tomorrow, can we succeed in our work. We must trust ourselves and one another to live up to our commitment to courage, curiosity and confidence together.

*U.K: Maybe we can take a step away from Schiller and make this more concrete. What are the results of the attitude you described for research and teaching? What have is specific to the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar?*

We must believe that we can change things for the better, and we will be able to believe this when we can actually see and experience our effectiveness and successes. From my perspective, this means entering into a much more intensive exchange with our societal partners, politics, business, culture and civil society. This would traditionally unfold through transfer projects – and we will continue to do those too – but it will also have to happen through more transdisciplinary exchange in research and teaching, through professional development programmes, application-based projects, and through formal and informal discourse platforms.

These approaches in no way represent the original responsibilities of a university, such as carrying out basic research. It is exactly this claiming of social relevance that requires us, on behalf of society, to think what has not yet been thought, to discover what has not yet been discovered, to say what has not yet been said, in order to make a more beautiful, ergo freer, future possible in which we can be free from worry and fear.

It is also part of telling each other, both within the University and in society, about these wonderful new discoveries. First by not only sharing our thoughts with students, academics and artists who come to Weimar, but by also involving them in their creation. We want to study, carry out research and achieve things here together. Things that are not possible in other places.

We also want to explain to citizens the nature of our scientific, artistic and design research in all its complexity and beauty. This means that we will need to communicate our achievements more, better, more appropriately and more intensively. And as far as I can tell, this is something that we want to do.

As your Presidium, we will continue on our participatory path, actively involving students, graduates, colleagues, and university partners in our decisions and developments. And we have already begun setting the structural stage for the University: Your new position as Vice President for Social Transformation, for example, is an initial result.

*U.K: Closing remarks*

I am coming to the end.

I am back in Weimar, I am back at my university – this time as President.

An enormous, complex, beautiful task – as I said – beauty is a requirement for freedom. We have everything we need to construct, build and design this »being free« in our own hands, for our community and for society far beyond ourselves. The Bauhaus-Universität Weimar with its Faculties of Architecture & Urbanism, Civil Engineering, Art & Design, and Media, is perhaps like no other institution in Germany – or even the world? – in the position to tackle the challenges of our time. This task should be both a shared honour and a pleasure for us.

We – the new Presidium – want to continue working with each other and with you on finding solutions, and we are well aware that most issues are complex and involve various interests, perspectives and interconnections and that there is often no single »right« solution. And so we encourage you to continue sharing your thoughts and ideas.

Thank you.