

‘Yes, we can’t’¹

AIR programme director Marijke Hoogenboom reflects on the potential of arts education

by Marijke Hoogenboom

In 2009, the Dijkgraaf committee was set up by central government to advise on higher arts education policy in the Netherlands. Its report ‘*Onderscheiden, verbinden, vernieuwen*’ (Differentiate, connect and innovate) was published just after the general elections in June 2010. It opens with the surprisingly encouraging statement, ‘Arts education holds an important key to the future of the Netherlands’² and points out that our sector’s impact and broad acceptance gives the arts a central role in society. This is a striking position to take in a climate hot with disputes on the value and effectiveness of art and culture.

The committee’s great appreciation of artists, and arts education is reassuring, such as when it recognises the sector’s crucial responsibility in the socio-economic domain. However, some of the conclusions drawn in the report spark questions. It paints a picture of the ideal artist as a modern, flexible and hybrid figure, a cultural entrepreneur equally at home on any of a ‘thousand stages’ (inside and outside the arts) and using creative skills to satisfy the increasing demand for their products and services, against a background of global growth in interest in the economic significance of the arts and culture.³

I wonder whether art education would recognise itself in this analytical reflection on the future. As I see it, those of us fortunate enough to be engaged in arts education are fully aware that we are training young people for activities and professions that are undergoing upheaval worldwide. The higher arts education sector is faced with the choice of responding to the logic of the creative industry (and integrating this thinking into study programmes and policy plans) or proposing its own alternatives. Extending the report’s reasoning, if the valued qualities of the arts are so evident to all, surely the sector is by definition the best qualified and best placed to apply those qualities to the shaping of its own future. Let us prioritise the independence of the creative spirit (something society is sorely in need of) and invest our creative potential and critical capacity in a socio-

¹ Deborah Hay during her residency Breaking the Chord in February 2010.

² *Onderscheiden, verbinden, vernieuwen, Advies van de commissie-Dijkgraaf voor een sectorplan kunstonderwijs*, p 4, commissioned by the HBO raad, The Hague, May 2010

³ Richard Florida described this trend several years ago in *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Basic Books, New York, 2003.

economic risk venture. I agree with Charles Esche, who said, 'The academy is not only a place where art is taught, it is essentially a place where we imagine things otherwise.'⁴

Arts education places trust in the innovative potential of the arts and fully integrates artistic expertise in all aspects of the organisation. We have the privilege of working with artists continually and in a multiplicity of ways. Artists teach, lead study programmes and institutes, connect with professional practice, perform research and advise at every level. The Artist in Residence (AIR) programme is no superfluous luxury in this enterprise. Being part of an educational institution on a day-to-day level does not always provide the ideal fertile environment artists need for their growth and their full benefit to the institution. The AIR programme allows the invited artists to take advantage of the safe haven of the Academy in a more open way and tap its potential for addressing aspects of their practice and research or use it as an international laboratory for current developments in the arts.

The institutes of the Amsterdam School of the Arts make the best possible use of their artists in residence. Through the AIRs, they engage with progressive practices, update their artistic agendas, set up new collaborations and re-examine their educational ambitions. Arts education focuses attention almost exclusively on individual students, and it is because of this that the AIR programme addresses themes beyond the scope of the curriculum that are certain to impact on the future of young professionals. Together with our remarkable guests, we respond to crucial issues such as the acknowledgment of artistic and cultural differences, identity formation in a mediated world, the fostering of more cohesive communities and connecting mutually isolated domains. And last but not least, we are set on dealing with the 'tsunami of renewal, extension and change, where the word 'art', as defined in a modernist high art tradition, hardly exists anymore'⁵

There have been 24 unique AIR programmes at the academy since its inception in 2004, and no fewer than seven artists in residence are active here this academic year (2010–2011).

Unfortunately, the experiences and results of these programmes often only impact on those directly involved, leaving little impression on the wider community of the Amsterdam School of the Arts or on the professional field. With ON AIR, we want to bring about a change in that situation. Twice a year, we will use the medium of this journal to report back on the initiatives the various departments and institutes have set up within the AIR programme. We hope and believe that this will help the programme make an even more emphatic contribution to the ongoing debate at the Amsterdam School of the Arts and to solving the pressing issues facing arts education, now and in the future

⁴ Charles Esche, *How to grow possibility: The potential roles of academies*, edited transcript of Esche's talk at the book launch of *Air# Let's suppose the Academy is a place for artists...*, 11 January 2007.

⁵ Paul De Bruyne, Pascal Gielen (ed.), *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist Times*, p 147, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam 2009

At the start of her residency, the American choreographer Deborah Hay spoke to a large group of students and teaching staff. She revealed herself to be an artist with a deep sense of the absolute necessity of continually pushing at the boundaries in her work. Tirelessly, she asks herself, 'What if?' What would happen if we went beyond what we know, if we developed ever newer ways of observing ourselves and of engaging with the spatial and social environment? And as she moved through the hall, illustrating how she as an artist is devoted unconditionally to the here and now ("What if every cell in the body at once has the potential to perceive the uniqueness and originality of time?"⁶), her president's election slogan came to mind. With a winning smile, she turned it on its head and passed it on to the youthful talents at the Theatre School and perhaps even to the broader Dutch art world: 'Yes, we can't!'

It is our responsibility to never be satisfied with what already exists, but to strive for the impossible, the unimaginable.

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⁶ Deborah Hay, The Match, Writings and Notes, www.deborahhay.com