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IMAGINE THINGS OTHERWISE

A text for the 10th anniversary of the Hessische Theaterakademie

7 December 2012

When Heiner and Philip invited me to contribute to this celebration, it was an act of seduction. Seductive because they said: It will be a rather informal gathering, a meeting among peers, a moment of enjoyment in the spirit of a dinner table, never mind the discourses, just share your experience and work with us. I am not sure if this matches the expectation of everybody who is present here today. The invitation you got proposes a rather clear topic, even a kind of assumption about the two separate and/or interrelated fields of art practice and academic research, and I believe there are many representatives from both sides in the room.

Having said that, I also have to confess that I have never visited the Hessische Theater Akademie before (if it is one place at all), but I have used it already a couple of times as a serious reference in talks, discussions and even national policy papers. I used the model of the HTA deliberately when I needed to point out to my chairman of the board at the Amsterdam School of the Arts, the possibility of super faculty, super institutional structures. And I used it when I needed to convince our existing master programmes about a new graduate school, one that could bridge between the professional field and educations, as well as between different local contexts. Even if my narrative about the HTA was until today based on pure fantasy, and I have kind of hijacked your structure for my own imagination, I am very grateful that you have made the HTA available as such a useful example.

I would like to expand and twist the proposed topic a bit, and indeed apply it to my own work in Amsterdam and to the questions and challenges that we have come across there. I want to pay attention to the very purpose of this gathering, the celebration of a founding moment, the official bond between several institutions. And also, I appreciate that you have reminded me of my involvement in the foundation of DasArts. This is more than fifteen years ago, and maybe it is now time to revisit this period, so I will use a little bit of that history too.

1

To begin with: Yes, I have been involved in the debate about *artistic research* for a while now. It is almost exactly ten years ago that – following the Anglo-Saxon model, and following the call of Bologna – the possibility for research in the universities of applied sciences, the polytechnics, was introduced in the Netherlands, and many other European countries.

You could say that I am a typical product of circumstances. My research group Art Practice and Development – and a couple of other groups in the Netherlands – would never have existed without this policy of slowly homogenizing our educational system.

The way I have perceived the debate is controversial. Ten years ago it was mainly focused on the ambition to define characteristics of artistic research that would make it distinctive within the whole of academic research. It was focused on distinguishing a new paradigm from other qualitative research paradigms. There was a sense of attack and infiltration of the traditional 'kingdoms of knowledge production' that excited the art world.

Artistic research established itself in that period. It is fully integrated. There are growing numbers of PhD fellowships and governmental programs throughout Western Europe. Maybe soon the DFG and the Volkswagenstiftung will get on board, too. There is the society for artistic research SAR, the journal for artistic research JAR, and an international alliance of institutes in higher arts education SHARE.¹ There seems only a small group of disbelievers who suggest – as they do in the October issue of the Belgian art paper De Witte Raaf – that a counter movement might soon start there, of artists reclaiming the right not to be part of it.²

So forgive me if I am less interested in isolating artistic research as a new paradigm, as a field on its own. I guess I'm troubled that the direction it's taking is just too occupied with gaining institutional power by way of expanding its networks and legitimizing its own discourse.

The position from which I speak is the art school, which in the Netherlands is still separate from the university. We are still one of those rare countries that maintain a strictly binary infrastructure. This creates many challenges (especially in research), but it also has advantages, which in this time, in the Netherlands, I prioritize.

For example: many demands of Bologna – modulating, upgrading, reducing, adjusting – do not apply to us yet. All of a sudden it seems that we have more resources available for our students than any university (human resources, hours, production facilities, flexibility). We still can offer four-year BA programs and 2-year MA programs. We operate limited student numbers and we can select carefully at the front door. But also, talented students can enter without an A-level High School diploma. That might lower the intellectual potential of the academy, lower the potential for theory so to say, but it also increases the diversity of biographies and makes us aware that our academies and universities – like our theatres – are still rather exclusive enterprises.

¹ Society for Artistic Research (SAR) and Journal for Artistic Research (JAR) www.jar-online.net
Step-change for Higher Arts Research and Education (Share) www.sharenetwork.eu

² De Witte Raaf, No. 159, Brussels Sep-Oct 2012, www.dewitteraaf.be/edities/detail/nl/127

The position from which I speak is also challenged by a *cultural meltdown*. Unfortunately the Netherlands has turned into a backward-looking country. We are not only confronted with the results of the politics of our neo-liberal, populist government, but also with a society that is obviously willing to give up arts and culture as a common good. At the same time that our sophisticated artist-centred funding system is almost being destroyed, art academies are of course, specifically being addressed to rethink their studies (for a tight labour market) and to reassess the impact of education and research on social and economic developments. In a way we are being urged to take a reality check: *why are we here, and are we still up to what is needed?*

My problem is that this is not a silly question at all. It's the question we should ask ourselves every day. But perhaps with a slightly different agenda in mind.

Contemplating what I could offer to you, I realized that I have been taking some distance from the debate on artistic research as such, and that in my work I have tried to look more closely into *what research in the arts does*, particularly, perhaps, into what it *needs* to be productive beyond production, as an ongoing process – for a larger group of people and within institutional structures. I'm afraid that by doing so, I will deliberately try to strengthen the potential of the art academy. So I am not doing Giessen or Bochum or Hildesheim, where you have already occupied the productive gap between theory and practice. I am looking into other possibilities, possibilities that arise in this other kind of enterprise.

For the educational culture of the art academy in the Netherlands, the possibility to expand its research perspective marks a crucial shift. The introduction of research – as a separately funded and framed policy, outside of the academic world – has been an interesting force, because it is tapping into the current dilemma of the art academy and obviously providing some real opportunities.

The Netherlands has always been quick to adapt to recent developments or even trends – in cultural politics as much as in education. We seem willing to change, or even not establish, traditions, if the sign of the time is asking for something else: for new features, new structures, new funds. Specifically in art education the classical academy was already abandoned in the late seventies to be replaced by an objectified school system, transferable curricula and shared assessment criteria. By giving up the dominant idea of art education as an incomparable *Meisterschule*, we have opened up the academy and created the possibility for multiple differences between study courses that co-exist within a well-defined frame of reference.

In the performing arts for example, significant experimental movements have been able to enter the educational system and have been the driving force behind unique pedagogical

adventures like the School for New Dance Development or the Mime School. The innovative and independent performing arts scene in the Netherlands still owes its quality and vitality to these schools and to the opportunity they provide to link education and contemporary art practice.

But it is exactly this peaceful co-existence of a multiplicity of approaches – at the Amsterdam Theaterschool we maintain fourteen different BA programmes and two MAs – that has also resulted in a lack of *self-reflexivity* and in the academies inability to understand its own functioning within a broader context. Yes, of course, this broader context has to address changes in the outside world, as well as changes in the professional field, but I am patient. When I wish for self-reflexivity in the current situation, I am primarily concerned that there is a great need to confront the different traditions the academy seems to embrace. And a great quest to re-examine the general assumptions that our programmes are based on: A kind of *Grundlagenforschung* into what we are doing, how and for whom. And what we need to learn from.

The two main traditions that still determine the identity of our academies is the idea of the vocational training, and the figure of the modernist artist as a heroic entity.

On the one hand, our art schools envision themselves as professional programmes, places of craftsmanship, even, where teaching is probably not only dedicated to transferable skills and techniques anymore, but to its contemporary equivalent: a thorough set of qualifications. As in the past, the emphasis is on something that has already proved its value, and therefore belongs to the canon of knowledge, generally accepted as necessary for practising a specialized profession or discipline.

Professional training in the art academy is also extremely practical, with the emphasis being on the work in the studio, on the experience, the doing, the logic of making.

And although this *material awareness* is one of the greatest capitals of the academy, it has unfortunately resulted in the assumption that theoretical subjects should be taught separately from the practical work, detached from the embodied wisdom, in separate spaces, with a different kind of teacher who hardly connects to the practice of their colleagues.

On the other hand, our art schools still foster the idea that young talent needs to manifest itself as an autonomous mind breaking away from rules and regulations in order to realize itself. This process of becoming a unique artist provokes the very opposite to the acquisition of a body of knowledge and joining a profession. It is therefore situated in an intimate one-to-one educational relationship, where the single student is supported in the finding of his or her own voice and to address his or her own questions. But too often, students are also encouraged to resist acknowledging the cultural embeddedness of their work.

I don't want to diminish the importance of this precious investment in artistic growth. And I don't want to trash the creative author as a 'savage mind', as somebody who doesn't need to know, but I am tempted to state that by putting the commitment to our students and the unity between the person and the work centre stage, the contemporary academy is constantly at risk of being driven by a pedagogy of psychology.

However, the curious result is that both tracks seem to nurture an almost anti-intellectual climate in our art schools, a struggle to think and to reflect art making as much as a social, as an intellectual and a practical discipline. In the current climate in the Netherlands, programme directors would rather agree to define their studies according to the present labour market and highlight what can be converted into economic value, than to insist on the potential role of the academy to envision the future of the arts beyond codified modes – and to envision the future of education beyond the violent separation between theory and practice.

Consequently the traditional art school in the Netherlands situates research and development almost exclusively within the work of students, as an intrinsic part of their practice: as a conceptual, or an intuitive kind of discovery that, in the end, is not verifiable, not transferable, and not applicable to other contexts. Our programmes and the ways in which we imagine research as part of the academy are tied to the notion of an individual, subjective journey, as much as to the academy as a whole, and this ultimately serves the personal development of single talents. In my view, this is not enough.

Despite the very social dimensions and the many collaborative aspects of our work, one could say, the academy lacks *community*. It lacks opportunities to expose students to issues beyond themselves; it lacks the possibility for professionals to share their own questions with each other; it lacks an invitation for teachers to reflect critically upon their principles. In that sense, my interest in artistic research exceeds the dynamics between theory and practice within artistic processes: there are other players in the game. There is more that the art academy can produce. And there is more to explore from the world of *art making* and *art teaching*, that might inspire the university and the professional field alike.

So if I have a plea here today, it is the plea to expand the idea of artistic research – or research in the arts – into every corner of your institution and to use it as a vital challenge to *imagine things otherwise*.

And of course I wonder, if the introduction of some of the values of academic research has challenged the identity of the academy, how might it work the other way around? In what

way does the integration of artistic practice into university programmes challenge or even change the modes of that institution? Full stop.

In the following I will zoom in on some of the examples of our work, and suggest research in the art academy as *a site for education – a site for memory – and a site for collaboration*.

I just want to remind you that my Art Practice and Development research group is not an instrument to turn the whole art school upside down. It operates on a small scale, it is very much dedicated to the local situation, and it has until very recently been exclusively positioned, outside of the faculties and the studies programmes of the Amsterdam School of the Arts, as a happy parasite, somewhere in between.

2

Let's start with teaching. On the tenth anniversary of DasArts in 2005 I wrote the following: 'When we celebrate the anniversary of a school, what is it exactly that we are celebrating? Is it the great effect this school has on the individuals and groups involved? Or are we specifically celebrating our faith in a very particular type of enterprise – the enterprise of education?'³

The Amsterdam School of the Arts has four different departments that educate art teachers who will work at primary and secondary schools and within art institutions: for theatre, dance, music and visual arts. All of these young educators, and their older colleagues who teach them, struggle with a crucial ambition of their profession: they are full of good intentions.

They want to 'do right in education'. They believe in emancipation. They make an effort to bridge the gap between the informed and the uninformed. They foster individual development and enable people to upgrade their abilities. They are interested in good kids and want to make them capable citizens. They are also, and I say this without cynicism, constantly thinking of how to change and improve learning environments, in order to change and improve the effect they have on pupils.

Lately these professionals have also been having some doubts about their intentions and about the educational relationship they establish. Art teachers in schools are increasingly confronted with the media-cultural and multicultural reality of the classroom and have to admit that too often the content and format of their lessons no longer connects with the life and experience of their pupils. Possessing knowledge is confronted with ignoring

³ Marijke Hoogenboom, 'Who is afraid of (art) education? Some indecent proposals', in: Ulrike Melzig, Marten Spangberg, Nina Thielicke (eds.), *Reverse Engineering Education in Dance, Choreography and the Performing Arts (follow-up reader for MODE05)*, b_books, Berlin 2007.

knowledge. The wish to emancipate children by instructing them, all of a sudden becomes a painful paradox. And the well-intended situation of education becomes a matter of power.

I have been able to support two research projects, in which teachers from our departments invested into new didactic models, based on what is called 'authentic art education'.

In both projects – in visual arts by Emiel Heijnen and in dance by Lot Siebe – the basic methodology is to link the arts and culture pupils experience outside of the school, to the curriculum in the school. The researchers distinguish between *self-initiated* art and school-art; between expressions that come into existence in the private and social sphere, and those that are created within an institutionalised environment. Obviously these expressions differ dramatically from each other. Popular media and the diversity of social dance cultures determine the pupils' skills and perception, but they hardly find their way into the classroom. By carefully observing, documenting and collecting the drawings children make at home, the clips youngsters create with their smartphones, the dances Moroccan girls celebrate in the living room or the battles Caribbean boys perform for each other, the researchers have built new sources for another approach to their profession.

Whereas these projects focus on discovering the wealth of knowledge and imagination that pupils carry themselves, another research project with contemporary visual artists and the American art historian Terry Barrett is questioning the role of the teacher even more fundamentally. Barrett believes that everybody should have access to new works of art, but for him that requires that art teachers no longer consider themselves experts who have the right to tell people what to think. He proposes that they would be better advised to train their communication skills and act as facilitators of conversations to support people in their appreciation and enjoyment of contemporary art.

The procedure Barrett suggests is seductively simple. In the research project 'Art Works', students and teachers from our department exercised three basic questions to open up the dialogue with a variety of groups – children, teenagers with autism, businesspeople, and elderly people. With honest curiosity, they asked: 'What do you see', 'what does it mean' and 'how do you know'. Instead of giving answers they were listening and encouraging follow-up questions so that the discussion could continue and deepen. And when things went well, it was difficult to distinguish the teacher from the learner.⁴ Barrett's methodology, as much as the approach of *authentic art education*, resists what is commonly accepted educational practice and is instead suggesting bridging the gap between pupils and teachers and shifting the attention of education in the arts from explanation to questioning, and from

⁴ Terry Barrett (ed.), *Art Works, People Respond to Contemporary Art*, Thieme Art, Deventer/Amsterdam 2010.

informing to acknowledging.

In my view departments for art in education should not be underestimated. They are the laboratories for reflecting upon the paradox of education, and so they could have a great influence, not only on the young generation as it learns, but also on the self-reflexivity of the institution as such.

In that respect, I am extremely happy that also from our major research project *Inside Movement Knowledge*, on the documentation and transmission of dance and choreographic knowledge, some of the fruitful follow-up projects are dedicated to pedagogy as well. Our BA programmes are now extending their classroom by way of digital archives and media tools that enable students and staff to study on their own terms the repertoire and methodologies of William Forsythe, Steve Paxton, Emio Greco, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Siobhan Davies or Anouk van Dijk.⁵

But we are also engaging in a new European network for dance educators that wish to share their practice, exchange material and reflect upon their different approaches. This includes developing an extensive database.⁶ For a field of education where teaching is mostly bound to the very personal method of artistic personalities, such a network is a perhaps unique step. And it is an excellent example of how some of the values of academic research become meaningful within the art school context: the effort to reference, the desire to share and the attempt to open up the black box of practice.

3

Let's look at another founding moment. The beginning of DasArts in 1994 was the absolute opposite to my call for the self-reflexivity of the institution. As a school DasArts was operating an ever-transforming, ever-moving organism, one that went hand in hand with the continual redefinition of our program and the celebration of the absence of structure, continuity, criteria and rules.

I remember a text by Tim Etchells, where he describes the first decade of Forced Entertainment as a long-term commitment 'not-to'. Not to notice certain boundaries, not to follow formal strategies, and so on, and so on. Likewise, DasArts had no curriculum, no permanent teachers, no regular classes. Instead there was a small dedicated staff and a restless mechanism that obliged the school to keep changing. Twice a year, two international artists would be invited to take over and curate a ten-week block from scratch.

DasArts' journey – at least in its early years – was the privilege of a postgraduate institute as an artistic project. This process was guided by the intuitive ground plan that

⁵ Inside Movement Knowledge, <http://insidemovementknowledge.net/>

⁶ International Documentation of Contemporary dance Education, www.idocde.net/idocde/

Ritsaert ten Cate, founder of DasArts and of Mickery, had sketched on a rainy afternoon in some dark Amsterdam café on the two sheets of A4 that I later stuck together myself, so that we could hang them on the wall and look at them as our road map, our handmade score to imagine a school.

The Belgian dramaturge Marianne Van Kerkhoven was probably the first person who articulated the dilemma that we had apparently created for ourselves: a refusal to learn. In an unpublished text on DasArts she writes: “Perhaps a contemplative component should be added to DasArts’ work ... It must be possible to develop a pattern of thinking that does not squeeze all the life out of life. If we, who are insiders, do not write about it, then outsiders will. So let’s get there before them.”⁷

DasArts has never desired to frame its mission and pedagogy in a broader historical or theoretical context, and has never examined those characteristics DasArts shared with other alternative academies: the ambition to flatten hierarchies, for example, the idea that artists should not be viewed as specialists and not isolate themselves from the world. Our arrogance and our decision to *remain ignorant* was obvious. And like the American scholar Mary Emma Harris who recalls the opening of the legendary Black Mountain College, we were convinced: “We were there and that was enough.”⁸

Today I wonder. In a time when everything has to be produced fast, and so-called innovation has to replace constantly what is now front of us, the resistance to context and memory – not-knowing and not-remembering – has become extremely problematic.

In the Netherlands one can witness the speed with which a society is willing to say goodbye to cultural institutions that carry the spirit of centuries. The Rijks Academy, the Tropical Institute and the Dutch Theatre Institute are all literally disappearing, together with many of the companies that have spent years building a repertoire and a practice.

It is frightening, but it’s also a wake-up call that the academy might be one of the few places where we can still take responsibility to make the past and the present meet in real time.

4

The second site I consider valuable in artistic research at the art academy is the care for unstable and the intangible heritage.

⁷ Marianne Van Kerkhoven ‘On the (im)possibility of art education’, her first, unpublished, text on DasArts, Brussels 1998.

⁸ M.E. Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, Cambridge/London, The MIT Press, 2002, p. 2.

In this field we have already invested in dance and choreography. We have supported Jeroen Fabius to carry out research on the legacy of the School for New Dance Development since 1982 and to publish TALK, a unique collection of reflections by everybody, or almost everybody, involved. And we have been able to initiate the complex long-term, interdisciplinary, international research project *Inside Movement Knowledge*, which I have presented already many times and that has ties to Frankfurt through the collaboration with Motion Bank and Scott DeLahunta. But there is another one I am particularly interested in.

When we speak of heritage in the Netherlands at the moment, we have to realize that it is not only the professional field that finds itself at the edge of precipice, because unique educational institutes that blossomed in the past twenty years are now also fighting budget cuts or the entrepreneurial ambitions of governing boards seeking to optimize our art schools and universities. One of these small-scale departments that is constantly under threat of vanishing altogether or having to merge with larger structures, is the *Amsterdam Mime School*. Initiated by artists, it is to this day probably the only place I know of where not a single element of performance is taken for granted.⁹

In cooperation with Utrecht University and our research group, the theatre scholar and dramaturge Marijn de Langen is researching the history of the field of mime, as it has been developed in the Netherlands since the 1960s. Specifically, she is investigating the mime approach to performance, using statements and discursive documents that practitioners have been publishing over the years. Like other avant-garde movements, mime artists did not consider themselves as single entities; they were part of the constitution of an entire new field of performance. Marijn's research into the history of mime has therefore also become a research into the development of a profound notion of training and into the very foundation of the mime school as it exists today. Situating this research right at the heart of the art academy, close to the work of practitioners, has encouraged Marijn to develop two side-projects that inform and complement her research program.

She has organized encounters between performing artists from different generations who associate themselves with mime (Edit Kaldor, for example, who rephrased the genre as 'small-scale self-authored work'). And she has started a project of re-enactments of historical mime works with current mime school students. Both initiatives are performative in their own right. The encounters functioned as blind dates between two artists who did not know that they would meet each other. They were locked up in a small garden house in the backyard of DasArts, and left alone with secret keywords that Marijn had prepared for them and a tape

⁹ The Mime School (Mime opleiding) is part of the BA programs of de Theaterschool, Amsterdam, www.ahk.nl/theaterschool/opleidingen-theater/mime/

recorder to document the conversation. The meetings were hilarious: an unforeseen celebration of recognition, surprise, storytelling, stuttering discovery, misunderstandings, curiosity and, ultimately, bonding. We have published a small booklet with excerpts from the transcripts that has become a precious document in the performing arts community – but I'm afraid there is material for a whole book.¹⁰

The re-enactment project, which we have repeated for two years now, had created a similar confrontation. Students re-envision a work of their choice, whether from the bits and pieces of documentation that is left, or from the oral narrative that lives in the community. They then perform their response to the piece in front of their peers and a small audience from the school, including the artist who originally conceived the work.

The dynamics of such a project, with different artistic and theoretical practices, different protagonists, and different perspectives – and addressing a hybrid group of interested parties involved – has made me particularly aware of the necessity of research within the academy. We insist on inventing, but we also insist on revealing and remembering.

The commitment of the academy to care for creative formats for self-archiving and transmission is vital for ensuring that the knowledge that contemporary performing arts traditions have produced does not end up in museum storerooms, but is revived in the classroom and in the professional field. Here in Frankfurt it might sound obvious, but in Amsterdam it is indispensable: these modest investments in our own memory are probably the only way for the performing arts community to safeguard and still be inspired by our vulnerable heritage.

5

That brings me to the last perspective on research in our academy that I want to mention, and that is 'Research as a site for collaboration'.

Quote: "There's nothing in the world like the feeling of being in the studio, working along and whamo, something starts to take off, to go wowowowow, juice up. But it doesn't happen right at the get go, and it doesn't happen all the time, and it doesn't happen from working yourself into a tizzy of wanting it, or from anything to do with how you feel or what you plan. It comes along when it comes along. In the meantime you have to be in there, trying a bit of this and a bit of that and staying with all those semi moments, all those ho hum

¹⁰ *RTRSRCH vol. 2. no. 2: It is – Het is, Negen ontmoetingen tussen theatermakers*, compiled by Marijn de Langen, Amsterdam, 2009.

kinda moments, trying something else and doing it over, and perhaps like this, and working, but also waiting. You have to keep yourself available, keep the work available.”¹¹

It comes from extract the text *Dailiness* by the American choreographer Susan Rethorst. I am reading it to you because it was one of the sources that we explored, when the core of my research group – and the research group led by my colleague Henk Borgdorff – started to meet regularly. Eight to ten people met once a month over a period of almost two years. No PhDs yet, no students involved, just that work.

What was crucial for this group is that it deliberately provided an opportunity for artists, dramaturges and academics affiliated with the academy as teachers to engage in their own projects. It was also crucial that it was dedicated to reflect and speculate about ways to practice research in the arts *together*. We were proposing that research should be something other than the artistic practice of each individual involved. We were asking for a commitment to share knowledge about working methodology and theoretical discourse, beyond authorship or ownership. We were asking for an attempt at least, to consider several dimensions: the relation between content and expression, between thinking and the unthought, and between perceiving and speaking. And we were proposing to problematize the dynamics between emerging terminologies and performative actions, between the visible and the articulable and between light and language. The interplay between practice and theory appeared as something very real, something that was present at every moment and in every stage of the process, contained in strategies and concepts, sometimes more explicit and often implicit, struggling to be articulated, hidden in the ‘thinking-doing-of-what happened’.

Although I’m absolutely convinced that artist-researchers have to claim the right to speak in the medium of their choice, I must confess that there have been three pretty traditional formats that have been particularly useful for us: the *table*, the *studio* and the *printed matter*. With all three we exercised vocabularies, readings, writings, participating in each other’s experimental set-ups and finally designing our flexible dissemination platform RTRSRCH that would only appear when needed.¹²

So if I am talking of collaboration here, I don’t refer to the participation in one joint project. Almost in contrast: it is an attitude, it is the effort of a diverse group of researchers to create a space to negotiate individual differences.

¹¹ Susan Rethorst, ‘Dailiness’, in *Choreographic Encounters, Cork, Ireland, Institute for Choreography and Dance*, 1, 2003 pp. 28-33.

¹² *RTRSRCH* is a publication of the ARTI (Art Research, Theory and Innovation) research group at the Amsterdam School of the Arts. The journal reflects the interests and problematising strategies of the ARTI research group. It aims to explore and facilitate processes for creating, sharing and distributing emerging knowledge(s). The presentation of content varies from issue to issue, dependent on the topic and stylistic concerns of the guest editor. All issues are available online: www.ahk.nl/lectoraten/kunstpraktijk/publicaties/rtrsrch/

One of our formats, the table, is also central to the research *Table Talks* led by the dance dramaturge Igor Dobricic, who was part of the group at that time. His research emerges from his desire to create circumstances in which conventional 'coming together' and sharing a situation inside a concrete context could be suspended and put on a different ground. Igor assumes that in a world where things and situations are made for us, we have a tendency to take them as given and engage with them without considering their coming into being. But what if the physical action of building something together is the very essence of the situation? *Table Talks* is based on an intentionally naive belief that the complexity of encounter can be condensed into a singular group act: the making of a concrete, simple, material object – a table.

Igor built his first table with our group, but over the past two years he has built another eight tables in various cities in the world. Each time, he did it with people he didn't know beforehand, people who are not professionals and who are not united by their history, skills or friendship. Each time, the members of the group depended on each other, on the material that they brought along, and on the food that might be shared at the end of the process. Each time, Igor also took the risk of producing nothing – no object at least. There was no trace, nothing but the human relations that the situation was set up to enable. He says he trusts the collaboration, the desire to create a space in which differences can be negotiated.

Is it coincidence that Igor recently continued his *Table Talks* in Cairo? Does that qualify as artistic research? I hope so.¹³

Research as a site for education, a site for memory and a site for collaboration: it may seem like a luxury at the academy, but it is actually a vital necessity. Through research, places of education can manifest themselves as *places of generosity*.

But I have one final remark on this subject: If artistic research is not nurtured by an environment that allows for time, care and an extended perspective within institutional structures, I'm afraid that the very phenomenon of research will quickly become a perfect tool to align both artistic production and the art academy itself with the neo-liberal market economy and with the standardization of education.

6

I would like to close my contribution to this event with a seven-minute video. This is actually my present to Heiner, Dieter and Nikolaus. The video was made by Ritsaert ten Cate in 2008

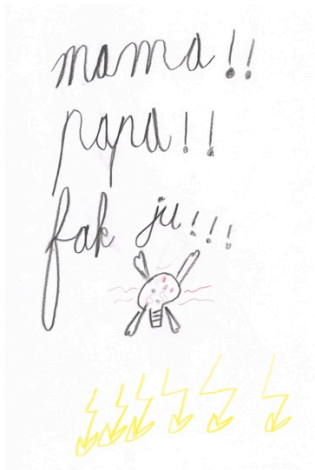
¹³ Igor Dobricic builds tables with people, see www.egyptindependent.com/news/igor-dobricic-builds-tables-people

in collaboration with two young artists Catherine Henegan and Erik Hobijn. It is his last work, 'a meditation', created just three months before he died of cancer.

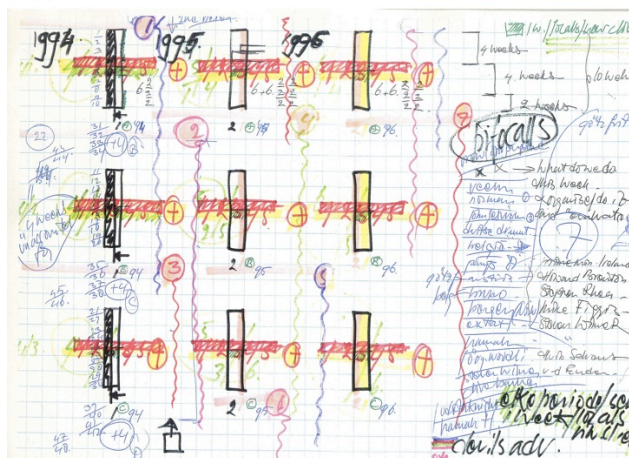
So, yes, you could look at it as an expression of a man that is aware of leaving soon. But likewise – and I am sure Ritsaert would prefer that – you can consider it as an expression of a tireless, risk-taking artist-researcher. Whether that's in life, in the arts, or in producing or directing.¹⁴

Happy birthday HTA!

2. Let's start with teaching



3. DasArts' original score



¹⁴ 'The Offering, a meditation' (2008) is available online at www.touchtime.nl/touchtime/index.html