

The AIR project involving Eboman was inspired by the doctoral research of AHK lecturer Emiel Heijnen into changing artistic strategies among young people and artists. Heijnen explores contemporary informal and professional art production and the possibilities it opens up for education in the arts, particularly the visual arts.

Artistic strategies in the network society

By Emiel Heijnen

What is happening in professional art practice? What are my students interested in? What are the latest theories on learning and teaching? One could argue that these are the three essential and recurring questions to which every art teacher should have an answer. Over the course of my four-year research project I have focused primarily on tackling the first two questions, working within the theoretical framework of authentic art education – a framework that is in itself a partial answer to the third question. Authentic art education was introduced to the Netherlands in 2001 by Folkert Haanstra. Emerging from a socio-constructivist theory of learning, authentic art education rests on the founding belief that art education is put to its best advantage in complex, lifelike learning situations that connect to students' interests, on the one hand, and developments in the professional art field, on the other.

In the course of my research I examine current art practices among amateurs, young people and artists, with particular emphasis on the influence of new technology on these practices. The young people and amateurs are incorporated into the research by studying informal creative networks formed by graffiti artists, musicians, fan-artists, cosplayers and other communities. The practices of professional artists are collated both through a literature study of socially engaged, collaborative art practices, and through interviews with Pilvi Takala, Evan Roth José Antonio Vega Macotela, The Propeller Group and other artists.

The typical characteristics distilled from the studies of contemporary informal and professional creative work practices

have produced a number of interim recommendations that provide an update to Haanstra's original theoretical framework. Below I set out a number of these recommendations, which are compared with the characteristics of traditional art education. It should be noted that the characteristics of traditional art education are merely used as a counterweight to the position I have taken. I do not suggest that there are no other innovations in art education going on. The recommendations set out below are directed primarily at those teaching visual arts subjects in secondary schools, but they can also be viewed from the broader perspective of arts education as a whole.

Encourage students to establish meaningful connections between professional art, popular culture and real-world local and global issues.

Young people develop expertise and artistic preferences based on specific areas of interest derived from popular culture. Their cultural production is not aimed solely at artistic development; it is also fuelled by an urge to communicate or to explore certain problems or interests. This broad approach is also evident among many contemporary artists who examine social issues through their work. It is possible to create an individually significant learning path for students by allowing them to respond in their work to topical issues (whether remote or close at hand), and to source inspiration from both popular culture and 'high' art. In traditional art education, learning is mostly focused on traditional 'high' art; popular culture and personal reflection on social issues are generally viewed as less relevant.

Stimulate interdisciplinary production

Young people and artists alike often mix a variety of media and art disciplines to express themselves. The rise of easily accessible multimedia technology has made a huge contribution to this development and stimulates the potential for merging existing art disciplines. Traditional art education is often presented in the form of mono-disciplinary, 'analogue' subjects such as drawing and handicrafts. This offers few opportunities for interdisciplinarity.

'The era of the artist as a lone genius has passed – if indeed it ever truly existed'

Stimulate longitudinal artistic research

There is a tendency among artists to embark on long-term research-oriented projects that produce a series of events and products rather than a single art object. Work that young people produce outside school typically draws on a long-term fascination and immersion in a single particular subject. Traditional art education is strictly product-oriented and typically involves only short-term assignments.

Encourage collaborative production as well as online and off-line interaction with people outside the classroom

The era of the artist as a lone genius has passed – if indeed it ever truly existed. Artists and young people alike use networks and collaborative productions to share expertise and experience and to utilise various skills. Furthermore, online networks make it possible to interact and cooperate with people all over the world. Traditional art education is usually based on individual development and one-to-one teacher supervision. There is little opportunity for cooperation and interaction with others.

The mastery of analogue and digital techniques is instrumental rather than a goal in itself

Technical skills increase the potential for creative expression. However, young people and artists generally learn these techniques as part of the creative process, driven by the urge to make meaningful work. The learning of a technique is very rarely a goal in itself. Traditional art education often embarks from the isolated acquisition of techniques and skills, with students only experimenting with creating personally meaningful work in later years.

Sharing, copying and remixing are seen as artistic processes

Art critic Claire Bishop points to selection as a key activity in contemporary image production. The search for and recycling of existing imagery and audio material plays an important role in the practice of contemporary artists, and it is also a prominent feature in the informal artistic production by young people and amateurs. The availability of the Internet (the archive) and digital technology (sample and remix tools) are important stimuli for these developments. In traditional art education, the recycling of existing imagery is often discouraged because students are required to think of 'something original'.

In my follow-up research I will further develop the theory of authentic art into a didactical model that art teachers will be able to use to underpin and structure their teaching practice. The practical testing of the model will take place in the context of a design-based study involving international art teachers joining the Remix Culture summer school. Teachers attending the summer school use the didactical model to develop a series of lessons that they will subsequently implement in their own teaching practice. The empirical studies of these practices will lead to a final analysis of the didactical model and its effectiveness.

Emiel Heijnen is teacher and researcher at the Amsterdam School of the Arts. Currently he works on a PhD at the Radboud University.



Jose Antonio Vega Macotela: Time Exchange

I interviewed Mexican artist José Antonio Vega Macotela in 2012. Between 2006 and 2010, he realised his project Time Exchange in collaboration with inmates of the Santa Martha Acatila prison in Mexico City. The project consists of extensive documentation of objects, drawings and photos. This photo shows a prisoner who Macotela asked to mark each scar on his body with an explanation of its origins. In return Macotela attended the birthday of the prisoner's mother.

IVES.One: Michael Jackson

IVES.one is a street artist from Amsterdam. I interviewed him in 2011. He has never studied art, but learned everything as part of the graffiti scene. In 2009 he was planning to make a stencil of Michael Jackson holding hands with a small boy. When Jackson suddenly died, IVES.one decided not to use this critical image but to honour him through a stencil of the young Michael. This image received a great deal of publicity and still appears in the public space of Amsterdam.

