

The school unbound

by Marijke Hoogenboom

An art school is more than its walls and the volume space within them. The arts can contribute at least as much to it as they can get from it. The school's effect is inseparable from what takes place outside the building. How can we, as an art school, best rethink our role? Should we peek over a few walls and see what's happening on the other side? The place occupied by the art school is not limited to the art school.¹

The Amsterdam University of the Arts has purchased a new building for its Arts in Education faculty, and in particular for de Theaterschool's masters and research programmes. The Grootlab building in North Amsterdam invites the school to be critical and meticulous in the relocation of operations. Because although an art school is more than a building, the building is often where everything begins. Where does it stand? How does it relate to its surroundings? What should be allowed in, and what should be given in return?

The story of the Grootlab is a charged one; the building breathes its hundred-year history as Royal Dutch Shell's laboratory complex, where research was conducted for the profitable exploitation of fossil fuels, frequently in developing countries. Its successor Shell Technology Centre was built nearby, and its research budget amounts to around a million dollars a day. At the same time developments are progressing rapidly throughout the Overhoeks area (on the north bank of Amsterdam's IJ waterway) and around the Grootlab. This neighbourhood – with its mushrooming high-rise blocks for key players in the creative and entertainment industries, a mega-size youth hostel and a congress centre – is already becoming known to locals as 'The Strip'. In the city centre, balance has been completely lost between tourism and livability, and the North borough is proving to be the most attractive location for giving the tourist and creative economies room to grow.

There's no shortage of puzzling contradictions: just along the road from the Grootlab one finds a celebration of an almost opposed ideology, where The Circular City (*De Circulaire Stad*) is being used to present the Buiksloterham area as a 'living lab' for sustainable regional development. But the image all these 'pioneers of the North' are trying to convey is obscuring the fact that not all of North Amsterdam is abuzz with new initiatives. The traditional neighbourhoods Van der Pek and Volewijck are still listed among the top twenty most deprived areas in the country. Setting aside for a moment 'borough chronicler' Chris Keulemans' faith in the effectiveness of local enterprises, the question remains: Will these two worlds ever come together, or as Keulemans himself asks in the Amsterdam daily *Het Parool*: will 'the new and the old eventually truly complement one another'?

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HOW FAR DOES THE ART SCHOOL'S 'PLACE' EXTEND? SHOULD WE BE SHUTTING WINDOWS AND DOORS OR BREAKING DOWN WALLS?

In this new vision of North Amsterdam, peeking over the wall has become something of a de rigueur activity for artists and creative, and there are many of them attempting to maximise livability through a variety of initiatives and cultural festivals as a way of protecting their values against the effects of gentrification. Although these artistic endeavours add colour to the unique identity of this area, the art historian Roel Griffioen suggests in *rekto:verso* that these artists and their work are often uncritical in the way they allow themselves to be swept along by 'an old-fashioned neoliberal urban renewal programme'. To what extent should we incorporate this complex local context in the structure of the educational programmes at Grootlab? How far does the art schools 'place' extend? Should we be shutting windows and doors, or breaking down walls? In any case, we in the arts world are long past the point where we can simply push this issue aside.

THE AUTONOMY TRAP?

The German publishers Kopaed recently published *What's Next? Art Education*, the second volume of a joint project with Zurich University of the Arts and the University of Cologne. In 2013 these three organisations co-published *What's Next? Kunst nach der Krise*, an impressive reader containing interviews, essays and manifestos on the future of the arts: three hundred authors explore the ragged landscape of a society undergoing a phenomenal rate of change, with familiar economic, political and social systems finding themselves unable to meet global challenges.

Its follow-up *What's Next? Art Education* extrapolates the consequences of this new society and the notion of 'the artist of tomorrow' into the realm of art schooling. The common thread running through the publication is the inevitable departure of the arts from 'the prison of autonomy'. Over the course of its 350 pages it celebrates cooperation and participation, remixing and recycling techniques, the multiplication of the author, and the expansion of the arts into the realms of science, the everyday and the social. The authors' standpoint is that the notion of the talented individual defined solely by the powers of his own authentic imagination can no longer serve as a role model for the contemporary artist, and should therefore also no longer be the conceptual departure point for study programmes and professional profiling. The British artist Jeremy Deller's insightful observation that he, 'went from being an artist that makes things to being an artist that makes things happen,' neatly sums up the transition so desired by the arts study programmes, while also expressing the forthright intention to be an artist operating *in* the world with the intent of *causing* something. Today, should all our academies follow in his wake? And if so, what form would they take?

There are plenty of examples of '*Verweltlichung der Kunst*' (art becoming worldlywise). One of the producers making consistent contribution to this dynamic is the New York-based

organisation CreativeTime. Ever since its inception in 1974 it has been an inspiring commissioner of and platform for art in the public space, particularly in the case of projects through which artists disrupt the prevailing order and connect art and a sense of political engagement. The driving force behind CreativeTime is curator Nato Thompson, author of *Living as Form* (2012) and *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st Century* (2015). Thompson firmly believes – sometimes to the point of unbearable positivism – in art’s potential to make a difference. Without a hint of uncertainty, he criticises the organisational models within which we work: ‘What we like, what we do, what we listen to, what we dream about, the world we hope for ... is increasingly controlled by huge and complex economic forces. Capitalism is thus not only out there – in belching factories, in gleaming shopping malls, and in politicians’ offices – but also emerges from us and targets us.’ Artists are in the same boat.

THE ART OF KNOWLEDGE

What this demands of us is a continual push for awareness through dialogue, knowledge, and shared research – in short: pedagogy. Starting in the mid-1990s this led to what is known as the ‘educational turn’ in the arts world, with artists and curators alike integrating pedagogical methods into their practice and programmes, shifting the age-old focus on the artistic object to collective processes of knowledge production – ‘art as continual education’, one might say. For example, the Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor, one of the key figures in the ‘educational turn’, held the Platforms 1-4 discussions all over the world on the subject of thematic areas of research. In 2015 he set up Documenta 11 in Kassel as Platform 5, to highlight the existence of a productive relationship between art and pedagogy as method *and* form. All his debates, lectures and publications centred on a single explicit political mission: to bring an end Euro-centrism in the arts. However, many subsequent initiatives focus to a greater degree on the more principle-based use of temporary, alternative and self-organised learning environments to undermine authoritarian structures.

CreativeTime itself developed Summit, an annual gathering lasting several days and sees artists and thinkers share their thoughts and hone their shared progressive agenda. They ask questions such as these: How can we best increase dissemination of specific art practices? How can we share responsibility for developing a particular field, or even a movement, that has the potential to, ‘transform people’s understanding of politics and their relation with the world around them’?

COURAGE AND IMAGINATION IS WHAT ART AND EDUCATION SHARE. BUT HOW TO BEST DEPLOY IT, AND TO WHAT END?

Last summer Summit went to the Venice Biennale with a project called The Curriculum. Its curator was, not entirely coincidentally, Okwui Enwezor. At the opening, even Nato Thompson had to confess that his supporters had been surprised by the choice of subject matter: ‘That pedagogy thing, wasn’t that ten years ago?’ The answer he gave to the participating artists,

curators, thinkers and politicians (including the Afghan president Ashraf Ghani and representatives of the Spanish opposition party Podemos) was simple: more than ever before, there is a need for places 'that function as a public forum and embrace narratives that are obscured by hegemonic powers'. CreativeTime's core aim was to provide a forum for the concrete proposals that courageous artists and pedagogues used to resist the USA's 'one idea system', one that is clearly – painfully – so at odds with contemporary hyper-diversity. Time and again, Summit reiterated its standpoint that no distinction is necessary between artistic and pedagogical qualities. In fact, it is almost a given for the contemporary artist that he or she continually operate a multiple agenda. In the last chapter of her book on pedagogical projects *Artificial Hells*, Claire Bishop points out that, 'Both art and education can have long-term goals, and they can be equally dematerialised, but imagination and daring are crucial to both.' *Daring and imagination*: this is what art and education share. But how should we deploy these qualities, and to what end?

Rather than seeking answers to these questions from Jacques Rancière – the author of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and a popular philosopher in artistic circles – the Summit's uncompromising case studies from Beirut, Ramallah, Jakarta, Cape Town, Petersburg, Los Angeles, Lagos and Venice resonated far more with the work of the innovative Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he writes, 'There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system, or it becomes "the practice of freedom", the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.'

And so it was that at the Summit the most committed advocates for connecting creativity, emancipation and education were students: the activists Joshua Wong from Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement and Sandino Bucio Dovali from Mexico's #YoSoy132. They reported on the desperate struggle against the sell-off of their universities and their resistance to political power. They bore witness to their most powerful weapons: their youth and belief in their entitlement to a fair future. Their message is a slap in the face to the 'ruling class': 'Today you are depriving us of our future, but the day will come when we decide upon your future. No matter what happens to the protest movement, we will reclaim the democracy that belongs to us, because time is on our side.' Whether inside or outside the art school, this pedagogy must awaken people's ability to enter into a critical relationship with any and all powers that threaten to constrict that potential. If only for this reason, it will help us if we learn to look over the walls.

NOT KNOWING IS NO LONGER ACCEPTABLE

While it is certainly true that in Amsterdam (as well as many other places inside and outside the Netherlands) there have been mass actions against the yield-focused outlook of university boards, generating proposals for a 'New University' (*De Nieuwe Universiteit*). But the silence of the arts academy was deafening. Students and teachers seemed to see little reason for joining

the protest. The silent consensus view was that all was well in the academy. For now, we can safely rely on our 'exceptional pedagogical model' comprising fruitful small-scale operations and beneficial connections between theory and practice, between classroom and studio.... End of story?

Viewing from our perspective in the Netherlands, we must surely all acknowledge that in recent years those of us on the work floor and/or in discourse have been fixated on adjustments to the curriculums, and we have been quick to accept the increasing quality controls and the influences of Bologna. We have done everything in our power to shore up the freedom of movement within the institutions and safeguard the independence of our study programmes. And one might say that we have been successful in our efforts. This is certainly the case in Amsterdam, where the most progressive masters programmes (originally set up by artists) still remain in a strong and uncontested position; the Mime Department, the School for New Dance Development, the Master of Choreography and DasArts. But the point is that the situation has changed. And it poses new questions to us *as citizens*. I am not raising questions here about politically related issues such as the renewed legitimisation of art, or about whether, as some in the field feel, the schools are producing too many artists. What I am talking about here is the matter of which questions we should be sharing with society. What responsibilities do we want to shoulder – for one another and for the future? How are we going to deal with the fact that our systems are no longer sustainable? As an educational institution, we must 'learn' to interrogate our apparently neutral position and act according to our convictions.

AS AN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION, WE MUST 'LEARN' TO INTERROGATE OUR APPARENTLY NEUTRAL POSITION AND ACT ACCORDING TO OUR CONVICTIONS.

I myself am the product of an institutional tradition that never sought to make statements about the future. We professed to be passing all responsibility to the students themselves. When Ritsaert ten Cate and I started DasArts in 1994, our motto was this: 'We cannot know what theatre must or will be tomorrow, the students of our post academic studies programme will have to show us the future.' What today sounds like a radical and unpatronising gesture – directed at both theatre as a whole and young theatre makers – also expressed the hope that we would not get bogged down in traditions and predefined structures. Still today, this attitude has a liberating effect on this institution that continues to operate without permanent teaching staff or a pre-structured programme of learning.

Nonetheless, this conscious choice to claim that we 'cannot know' sounds fundamentally different to us today than it did twenty years ago. In the world as it is now we can no longer afford to pretend we are unaware of the dramatic challenges presented by globalisation and the consequences of the economic crisis, climate change, increasing inequality and migration, the end to biodiversity, and the depletion of raw materials. Perhaps for the first time we are in a situation in which the future is speaking clearly to the present. It places responsibilities, in the present, on each and every individual and organisation with a focus on innovation and

development. Put another way – in the words of Defne Ayas, the director of Rotterdam’s Witte de With centre for contemporary art who led the ‘Institution as Form’ Summit session – ‘I doubt if we can still afford utopia ...’

VITAL ALTERNATIVES

All this makes the imminent move of part of the Amsterdam University of the Arts to Grootlab in North Amsterdam a very different proposition from a simple relocation. Or does it? The actual context of which they will form part is so complex and problematic that you can actually better concentrate on your core business as an educational institution for a very select company of international students; shut all the windows and doors! But it is precisely this generation of artists-of-tomorrow that will be faced with such a precarious existence, and because of this they are all stretching the boundaries of their practice. They will consciously experiment with vital alternatives: with a slowing of pace and care for one another, with a longing to form part of a greater whole, with new ways of co-creation and participatory decision-making, eco-efficiency and sustainability.

What, then, is our task as a school? This is the place where we cannot hide behind our students. Can the school allow organisational principles to be infected by the need for politicisation among all those artists out there in the world and right here in the Low Countries? How can we best root ourselves in the direct environment? Can we participate in an ecological discourse and truly acknowledge our shared destiny with real places and real histories? In what ways can we adapt the way we work? What are the activities that connect us with the world outside education and beyond the arts? Will we as an organisation – just like the artists – be able to behave fluidly and pursue multiple goals?

I look forward to an arts education system of tomorrow that accepts the existence of a unique reciprocal relationship between the arts and the local. We will only be able to truly fulfil our responsibility as a public institution if we can effect a shift in our instrumental intercourse with time and space. The Amsterdam University of the Arts has embodied these values and aspirations – which will guide us for the foreseeable future – in what we call the ‘Local School’. We cannot yet predict the form of our re-localisation to and around the Grootlab. But we have been warned. The cauldron on the north bank of the IJ is forcing us to face the facts of our times and the inevitable preconditions for each project. When art itself has become pedagogy – and pedagogy implies that you equip people for all the challenges they encounter, including non-artistic systems – then you must conceive the school as something far more expansive than the area between its four walls.

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