

Growing the arts in the cultural landscape

By Marijke Hoogenboom

The positioning of arts education and the place of artists within it are recurring topics in our publications about the Artist in Residence programme at the Amsterdam University of the Arts. Time and again we have attempted to show the importance of the influence of the professional field at large. We organise all sorts of direct exchanges between departments and professional artists' expertise, methods and imaginations. The AIR programme is the university's preferred instrument for initiating interactions with professional practice through unique projects and research programmes that go off the beaten track.

In this issue of ON AIR we are once again presenting a wide range of AIRs hosted by the Conservatorium van Amsterdam, the Academy of Architecture, the Reinwardt Academy, de Theaterschool and the Education in Arts masters programme. In October 2015 the Flemish Belgian cultural journal *rekto:verso* compiled a number of inspiring reflections on the current state of art education in the Benelux. As well as professional expertise and ideals for the future, this edition examined the quantitative focus of the market. Many contributors suggest that art academies as a whole are undergoing a deep crisis, and wonder how we should respond to ongoing transitions in society and what we should be passing on to the artists of tomorrow. The magazine's chief editor Wouter Hillaert concludes that, 'Arts education should not be a fenced-off field, but an allotment serving the entire cultural landscape, perhaps even society as a whole. To put it another way: to focus on the art school is to see the world. Should the school make that world, by training its youthful imaginations? Or is it playing catch up in the world?'⁽¹⁾

Back in in the early years of the AIR programme, The Amsterdam University of the Arts invited the director of the Van Abbemuseum Charles Escher to visit us and reflect on the nature of art schools and the fundamental question: 'Why do we exist?' His answer was as simple as it was confronting. He assigned arts education a key position in the chain, one on which our production is all but totally dependent: 'The art academy is, in a sense, where it all begins; and it should be where it all begins as well. We, as museums, galleries or institutions that develop art in public space, are completely dependent on the academy, because if the academies fail, then we have to find something radically different to do.'⁽²⁾

Esche warns, however, that this does not imply that the art school should be indifferent to its surroundings, or that it should hide behind traditional educational models devised long ago. Quite the opposite, in fact. He points out what a dilemma and impossible task it is to train artists, because ultimately they will choose their own path. So he urges the educational system to engage with a far more complex task. It must, he believes, take a

¹ Hillaert, Wouter, 'School maken' in: *rekto:verso*, 68, October-November 2015, www.rektoverso.be/dossier/school-maken

² Esche, Charles, 'How to Grow Possibility: The Potential Roles of Academies'. Lecture at the presentation of the first AIR publication in 2007. www.ahk.nl/lectoraten/kunstpraktijk/publicaties/how-to-grow-possibility/

holistic approach that focuses on imparting a mentality, an attitude, rather than a specific craft or discipline: 'If anything needs to be taught it is a certain attitude of mind: a particular ambition and a particular confidence when addressing your own questions to the world and listening to the world in order to define your own question.'

I interpret this as a plea for being human, and for a flexibility of mind that will ultimately spawn artistic self-will and independence. These same motifs run through all the AIR projects documented here: Claron McFadden challenged young musicians to step outside the limitations in particular genre or audience; Gabriel Lester was explicit in his embracing of free association and flexibility; Henk Schut prompted students to escape convention; Helmut Dick introduced strategies for developing receptivity to one's surroundings; and Steven van Watermeulen and his students used the Der Theatermacher project to bring about encounters with authentic directors who dare to think big and to break boundaries.

Although these short-term interventions initiated by AIRs across the departments and faculties may have playful and exceptional aspects, they are anything but undemanding. At the same time as the students are being opened up to new future-oriented possibilities, they are being challenged to take responsibility for their own actions within those possibilities – and perhaps even to realise that it is more necessary than ever before to take on board their personal responsibility as humans, citizens and artists in a world of limitless growth and waste.

In her State of the Union speech at the 2015 Flemish theatre Festival Union the artistic director of DasArts Barbara van Lindt drew on the work of philosopher Susan Neiman, who points out in her book *Why Grow Up?* that from a societal perspective there is little drive to transition into adulthood. Neiman believes that life is slipping away from us and that we are submitting in a rather childish way to the consumption economy. Grow up, she exhorts, and leave this infantilisation behind you. Drawing on Enlightenment philosophy, Neiman points to the ability to think for oneself as being the most important condition for adulthood. Van Lindt, however, cites Neiman primarily to advocate the development of judgement faculties as a component of both the education sector and the arts: 'Rather than yet more knowledge and expertise, the qualities you need to achieve this are courage, determination and generosity. Adulthood emerges from a painful sense of reality, but understand that being critical is not the only form of intelligence. It begins with a reassessment, with a fundamental re-examination of existing assumptions.'³

The re-evaluation of outspoken artists on the one hand, and the advocacy of 'growing up' on the other; we could hardly wish for a more suitable terrain for the AIR programme at the Amsterdam University of the Arts.

³ Van Lindt, Barbara, State of the Union, Het Theaterfestival, Brussels 3 september 2015, https://gallery.mailchimp.com/fadb12aeae5fd8d76ba71c61a/files/State_of_the_Union_def_01.pdf

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