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Photo: Thomas Lenden



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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/fadb12aee5fd8d76ba71c61a/files/State_of_the_Union_def_01.pdf

Claron McFadden



Photo: Thomas Lenden

Music Live

Interview with Claron McFadden



Photo: Thomas Lenden

About the project

The distinguished American soprano Claron McFadden was the Artist in Residence at the Conservatorium van Amsterdam for the entire 2014-2015 academic year. The Conservatorium gave McFadden carte blanche, and over the course of the year she offered students a variety of forms of training and education. Her coaching sessions, for example, were open to ensembles and individual students from all Conservatorium study programmes. Her innovative and interdisciplinary work practice was, in and of itself, an inspiration to the students. She taught them to look with an open mind and take a broad perspective, stimulating crossovers between a variety of disciplines.

Claron McFadden

Claron McFadden studied at the Eastman School of Music in New York, and debuted on the opera stage at the Holland Festival in 1985. It was the start of an impressive career, during which she worked as a solo artist with the likes of William Christie and Michel van der Aa, and with orchestras including the Residentie Orkest and The Budapest Festival Orchestra. McFadden is an in-demand opera singer. She received a Grammy nomination for her rendition of Birtwistle's *The Woman and the Hare* with the Nash Ensemble, and she won the 2006 Amsterdam Art Award. Her music theatre production *Lilith* had its world premiere at the 2012 Holland Festival. McFadden is the co-founder of Splendor, a self-run venue set up by top musicians and their audience. It functions as a meeting place, club, workspace and musical lab.

By Maria Hagen

For soprano Claron McFadden, learning is all about finding new ways of listening to music and thinking about music. 'I give the students innovative triggers and encourage them to open up their thinking as broadly as possible.' She was the 2015 Artist in Residence at the Conservatorium van Amsterdam, where she coached students from a variety of programmes to broaden their perspectives on music practice.

The eternal quest for new cross-connections

Claron McFadden was still very young when she became interested in the cross connections between genres. 'At secondary school I performed in musicals, played oboe in a youth orchestra and trombone in a jazz band. And later on when was at the Conservatory I was always on the lookout for new colours, for new innovations. I arranged and I composed. When making new connections I didn't set any limits between music theatre and jazz and ancient music. I'm always searching for the beauty, the essence of the sound. It's the purity of the approach that keeps the music vital.'

Stay broadminded

Students need to stay as broadminded as possible, believes McFadden. 'Why exclude Monteverdi from your repertoire, just because you're a saxophonist? Keep on searching for your authentic sound. Create your own niche. I think it's so important for young musicians to do that. Make sure you get out there and work together with other artists. If you limit yourself to one specialism, you'll soon find yourself left by the wayside in modern art practice. Take

dance and video, for example. They now play a crucial role in music practice. And the relationship between technology and music is a very exciting one, too. If you get plenty of experience as a young musician working in a multidisciplinary setting – like, for example, if you get used to moving on stage – I think that means you'll better equipped for the future.

Off balance

Claron McFadden made sure not to limit her residency to working solely with vocal students. One of the other groups she worked with was the Ebonit Saxophone Quartet. 'At the start, I put the students a bit off balance by confronting them with the sounds and timbres of the singing voice. I wanted to do something with them that was different from what they'd learned before. So we began working with a piece by Monteverdi. Of course people think, "What? Monteverdi? On a saxophone?" But it's really no odder than playing Bach on the piano. I once performed Bach's *Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben* with two saxophonists and a pan flautist. It brought the audience to tears. You get a completely different tonal quality. As long as you do it with respect, the music comes to life in a new way.'



Photo: Thomas Lenden

A rich toolkit

‘Students come to me precisely because of my broad approach. I want to get my way of working and thinking across to students because I’m convinced that it’s the future. What I try to do is shape the students’ mind-set. They want their thinking to be challenged, and they’re really open to new input such as encounters with other artists, trying new approaches, working with a microphone. And it’s all stuff they can take along with them on their life journey. I took the students to see my music theatre piece *Lilith*, a cross between jazz, classical and improvisation that I made together with a filmmaker, a librettist and a jazz composer. I performed it on an aquaphone, which gave it a new, almost mythical sound. It was a real eye-opener for the students, because they suddenly understood the added value of my approach to music. That’s the sort of moment when I think, “Mission accomplished.”’

Getting a taste of other disciplines

Claron McFadden is a great advocate of making time and space on the programme for trying out new things and forming new joint ventures. ‘As far as I’m concerned, you can’t separate expertise from interdisciplinarity. Of course you need to master your instrument, but if you can lay a good foundation, you can further perfect your skills in the field. If you learn as part of your studies how you want to present your music, you’ll be much better prepared for professional music practice. At the Conservatorium you’re bound to encounter other genres and disciplines. My job as Artist in Residence is to bring in my approach to music in a modern context. It’s all about giving a new impetus and broadening horizons, and there’s no reason that that has to be at the cost of specialist excellence.’

A reflection of our existence

Claron McFadden is an active member of Amsterdam’s Splendor, ‘A place for unbounded experimentation where artists can meet and inspire one another and their audience.’ ‘Time moves fast,’ says McFadden. ‘You can feel that the younger generation experiences things differently. The students are eager, always on the lookout for new perspectives. Concerts are more interactive nowadays, and young audiences have a greater need for that. That’s something we see at Splendor. There are still audiences that prefer traditional concert performances, but in some areas, such as opera, performance practice has moved on dramatically. As an artist what I want

to do is affect the audience. I see art as a reflection of what’s happening in society; it’s a finger on the pulse of social and human existence. It’s where you go if you want to find the emotions we share – our collective consciousness. Art can trigger the mind, the heart and the soul, and what I try to do is get that across to my students.

Maria Hagen is head of communications and marketing at Amsterdam University, and former head of communications at Amsterdam University of the Arts.



sounds and timbres



of the singing voice



Claron McFadden coaching Conservatorium van Amsterdam students. Photos: Thomas Lenden

Ebonit Quartet



Photo: Carlos Rosas

Learning from each other

The Ebonit Saxophone Quartet is a young and passionate ensemble made up of Simone Müller (Germany), Dineke Nauta (Netherlands), Johannes Pfeuffer (Germany) and Paulina Marta Kulesza (Poland). They got together at the Conservatorium van Amsterdam and are currently pursuing their masters studies as the first-ever saxophone quartet at the Netherlands String Quartet Academy. It was there that they got the opportunity to work with Claron McFadden, and they are full of admiration for the artist. 'Claron McFadden just has to enter a room and she fills it with her enthusiasm,' they exclaim.

McFadden's enthusiasm was infectious, and despite her busy schedule they managed to squeeze in rehearsals. McFadden treated the members of the quartet as artists of equal standing, making it possible for a real exchange to take place and allowing them to learn from each other. The most important thing she got across to them was the importance of being receptive and to listening to all sorts of other genres – ancient music, new music, jazz. Simone Müller explains that, 'Listening

to compositions from different eras helps you develop a broader vision. Contemporary music, for instance, is closely related to baroque music.'

Interdisciplinarity: an artistic necessity

All four members of the quartet agree that more demands are made on the current generation of musicians over and above those for excellent musicianship. 'If you want to survive it's crucial to be aware of how you present yourself on stage. It also helps if you learn something about marketing, for example,' explains Dineke Nauta. The quartet went to see Claron McFadden's *Lilith*, and, 'It was really inspiring. I'd never seen a show before that brought together so many elements. There was opera, new music, visuals – and all of that from just one person,' says Johannes Pfeuffer, admiringly. Although there are other crossovers, or you might see video projected at a concert, for example, it only really has added value if there's an artistic necessity, believes Pfeuffer, and if it's not just there to spice things up.

A colour for each tone

Inspired by Claron McFadden, the quartet started working on a project of their own that involved a crossover with another discipline. In *Nightfall*, painter Norman Perryman appeared live with the group to create a dynamic water-colour composition to Ebonit Quartet's music. The painter's composition was projected during the concert to literally give each sound its own colour. 'When it was over, it was gone forever, just like the music performance,' explains Paulina Marta Kulesza, 'But adding something like this can provide a helping hand in understanding complex music and finding a way to listen to the music and interpret it.'

Besides their masterclasses and studies at the Netherlands String Quartet Academy, Ebonit Quartet have a packed performance calendar. They play live in the Netherlands and Germany, and are currently working on a new CD, which is planned for release in February 2016. They won the 2015 Almere International Chamber Music Competition Almere 2015 and participated in the Dutch Classical Talent Tour & Award coaching and touring programme. Concerts are scheduled for February 2016 at Roest and Amstelkerk, both in Amsterdam.

Gabriel Lester



Photo: Joost Bataille

A flexible mind

**Gabriel Lester
interviewed by
Nik Berkouwer**



Photo: Thomas Lenden

About the project

In a joint programme with the Theaterschool's Scenography Department and the Film masters, the Academy of Architecture invited in Gabriel Lester to develop new educational projects as part of the International Year of Light. Lester organised three symposiums, entitled *Dawn*, *Day* and *Dusk*, and which guest speakers from home and abroad explored every aspect of light. At the *Light* workshop, Lester, Thomas Dieben, Uri Rapaport, Bart Visser and Gert Anninga oversaw fifteen research projects conducted by the participating students. The results of these projects were presented at an exhibition at de Theaterschool. Lester concluded his residency with a series of form study classes on matte painting, the glass painting technique used in film set design.

Gabriel Lester

Gabriel Lester is an artist and film director. A graduate of the Rijksacademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam, he has since lived and worked in several countries and is currently teaching at the Rietveld Academy. Lester makes films, spatial installations and video installations. He complements his solo practice through the interdisciplinary collaborative venture PolyLester. Lester is represented by Galerie Fons Welters in Amsterdam.

Artist in Residence Gabriel Lester has been working since October 2014 with students at the Netherlands Film Academy and the Scenography Department, carrying out research and design projects on the subject of architecture and light. This collaborative approach involving several Amsterdam University of the Arts programmes is characteristic of Lester's artistic practice. The domain in which he operates is broad and multifaceted, conceptually speaking. 'I try to get students to be flexible in their thinking,' he explains.

What was the aim of the seminars you organised on the subject of light?

'I wanted to get students to think about light in a three-phase process, and to continually review it from a variety of perspectives – scientific, philosophical, historical and artistic. In the first seminar [Dawn] we literally switched on the light. We looked at the functioning of the eye, and historical and philosophical aspects of light. The second seminar [Day] explored the effects and use of daylight. And the third one [Dusk] looked at similar aspects of artificial light. So all together we examined a cross-section of what light is and how it can be understood.'

How did you find working with students from different faculties at the Amsterdam University of the Arts?

'It's clear that the student's interests – their background and the culture in which they've been taught – have a big influence on how they work and think. It struck me how much of a positive effect this cross-pollination had on the group, and I'm keen on there being more and more frequent projects of this kind between the faculties at the Amsterdam University of the Arts.'

What are your thoughts about innovations in education, their consequences for arts education, and the future of the subject as a whole?

'There's no simple answer to that question. What I can say is that students are increasingly thinking, learning and working in a non-linear way. The result is that education has become a process of simultaneity. By that I mean that study, research and practice are becoming far more intertwined. When it comes to the future of the field, you can extrapolate what I just said and assume that people might increasingly be educated as generalists more than as specialists. In order to avoid that (if that's what's wanted) I think it's important that the specialisation should prevail. This has already been standard procedure for many years in music studies – people studying music and instruments in general, but specialising in one instrument. The upshot for professional arts education might for example be greater autonomy in the development and selection of study materials by students themselves. At the same time, you also need to be thinking about specialised and tailored coaching, which would enable students to enter into a dialogue with their own developing aims and ideas so they can assess them and modify them. These are just a few thoughts. As I said, it's all

much more complex than that. As a tutor, I've noticed that students are drawing on an ever wider range of influences and sources and that they would benefit from focused conversations as part of a bespoke teaching process.'

What do you mean when you talk about student's 'elasticity'?

'What I mean is trying to get students to think in a flexible way. The pressure to perform or working in unknown territory can often make them more rigid in their thought processes. Students can benefit from doing exercises that make the mind more flexible. We can more easily get to the substance of an idea or form by doing free-association exercises or imagining the different ways something could appear.'

What were the high points of the exhibition you organised as AIR?

'There were three groups of students – from the Academy of Architecture, the Netherlands Film Academy and de Theaterschool – and they were assigned to one or two senior lecturers. I was struck by how each group produced one standout project that was mature and complete. Any or all of them could

have been exhibited in a museum. One was a model revolving in the space with a transparent fabric that generated changing sculptural and architectural forms. Another project consisted of drops of water dripped into a tray of crude oil. When drops hit the layer of oil they broke up, creating lightness under the surface of the oil. It was a really beautiful dance between light and dark. The third successful project was a study of dust and light, a video documentation with a really compelling, subdued mood.

Could you sum up the goals and outcomes of your residency – and what resources did you have available to you?

'One goal was to equip students with other tools and ideas, and I think we were successful in that. Another was to get to work with students from various faculties, and for sure that was really a success. Within reason, I got access to all the resources I could have wished for, including extra teaching staff to work with the student groups. And there was always enough space to work – although it wasn't always easy finding and organising the space to exhibit. And I'm really delighted with what the students produced.'

Working with students on a tall scaffolding next to the old chestnut tree in the historic Academy of Architecture courtyard Gabriel Lester hung up a glass plate in a large frame. He is used it as part of his form study classes on matte painting, a glass painting technique used for film backdrops. The technique involves blocking out certain areas of the background and adding in another image to create an entirely different cityscape, for example.

Nik Berkouwer is communications advisor for the Academy of Architecture.

drops



The Dark Water project explored the boundary of light and dark. Photos: Thomas Lenden

and oil

transparent



Distorting the projection creates a shifting display of light in three-dimensional space.

fabric



A short film that takes us from the tiny specks of dust to infinite space. Photo: Thomas Lenden



Seminar 1:

Dawn

Friday 6 February 2015

with:

Marieke Baan
*Netherlands Research School
for Astronomy*

Peter Hanselaer
Light & Lighting Laboratory

Toine Schoutens
FluxPlus Healthy Lighting

Aaron Schuster
Philosopher

Seminar 2:

Day

Friday 13 March 2015

with:

Milo Grootjen
Astronomer

Marco Pasi
Philosopher

Richard Out
Lighting designer

Ernst van de Wetering
Art historian

Seminar 3

Dusk

Friday 22 May 2015

with:

Henk van der Geest
Lighting designer

Giny Vos
Artist

Guido van Gennep
Director of Photography

Juliette Nielsen & Sjoerd van Beers
Lighting designers

Disrupting the academy

Artists in Residence at the Academy of Architecture

Maria Hagen in conversation with Aart Oxenaar

The former director of the Academy of Architecture Aart Oxenaar was a key figure in setting up the Artist in Residence (AIR) programme back in 2004, working closely with the Conservatorium van Amsterdam and the Netherlands Film Academy. Together, they drew up the framework and mission for the cross-faculty Art Practice and Development research group. Oxenaar saw this interdisciplinary, practice-oriented research group as the ideal home for a programme such as AIR. 'The fundamental idea was to bring our students into contact with other disciplines,' he explains, 'But as well as getting Academy of Architecture students interacting with different disciplines, I wanted them to be exposed to "the other", to be surprised and unsettled. And over the course of the residencies in the last ten years we've fulfilled those aims.'

Agitation: an essential tool in arts education

'Encounters and confrontations with other disciplines are excellent ways of introducing new perspectives or approaches into educational programmes,' says Oxenaar. 'One unique example was Krisztina de Châtel's residency. Rarely have I seen such outstanding interaction between disciplines. Many of our students come straight out of a technical foundation course, and they're often pretty cautious. When we announced the De Châtel residency, one of the students said with a sigh, "I hope you don't think we're going to dance!" But Krisztina managed to get them on her side in a trice. Soon enough they figured out that her workshop wasn't about dancing, but about moving in the space. And what architects, landscape architects and urban planners do is make and organise space, so understanding how you move through space is central to their craft. The workshop took the students out of their comfort zone and wrong-footed them – and that got them thinking. I believe that's essential for education, and for all forms of arts education.'

A world of squares

'Architect and artist Luc Deleu put up for discussion his own perspective on the role and position of the architect. Deleu's Belgian background undoubtedly influenced his outlook. He puts it this way: "Belgian's are born with a brick in their hand – they want to build their own home." Deleu looks in totally new ways at residential patterns on a global scale. He sees the world as being made up of lots of little squares, and everybody should get one to shape it in his or her own way. It's a refreshing approach to architecture and urban planning.'

An explosion of visuals

'Adman Erik Kessels from KesselsKramer took amateurism as the subject for his workshop. He believes that students all too rarely get the opportunity to look beyond their ring-fenced specialism. But in fact it's only when you dare to explore new territory that you start getting inspired and encounter new ideas. Working with sound material, our students were transformed into amateur photographers, painters, composers, sculptors. It was like Picasso had been unleashed in the academy; there was an



explosion of fantastic visual pieces all over the building. It was a remarkable experience for our students, because they had stepped out of their comfort zone and looked afresh at themselves and their work.'

Crossing landscapes

'The artist Jeanne van Heeswijk held site-specific workshops outside the school to connect with local initiatives as a starting point for thinking about what you can contribute, as an artist. *Reinventing the Local* was a literal exploration of an area, with students criss-crossing Deltaport – an urban landscape of polders, railways and industrial buildings – in search of new creative pathways.'

Light building

'Adriaan Beukers and Ed van Hinte took an unexpected line of approach to architecture. Journalist Van Hinte and Beukers, a professor of aerospace engineering, conducted experiments using light material. They encouraged the students to experiment with materials and construction methods and to look for advanced new lightweight solutions for building. They wanted the students to learn to feel what materials can do, and to take that potential as a starting point. The students all tried to make the tallest possible constructions using the lightest possible materials – transforming the inner courtyard into a playground of outlandish constructions with a light footprint, using bamboo, inflatables, and rope and boiled glue.'

Strategic disruption to the process

Oxenaar sees these examples as representative for all the residencies at the

Academy of Architecture. 'The artists got the students to engage with new perspectives on their craft, and force them to take up a new position on it. Each of the artists took their own approach, one that suited their own way of thinking and working. But what they all had in common was that they disrupted the academy for a while,' explains Oxenaar. 'We chose this approach very consciously, because if you want to develop as an artist you need to seriously examine other disciplines and get inspiration from them. And it's been very valuable for our students. These periods always unleash all sorts of stuff, and they disrupt the academy and those who operate in it, but they also always bring along a whole new sense of vitality.' 'That's the background to why we believe the AIR programme is so important. Every time we do it, the programme directors get into long and intensive debate about it. The heads of department have their tentacles in other arts and they come up with proposals. Marijke Hoogenboom, the head of the AIR programme, has major value in this process. She helps us to make choices, shape ideas, and put them into practice.'

So much more is possible

'What I do find a pity,' says Oxenaar in conclusion, 'is that we haven't managed to use the AIRs over the last years to get a school-wide multidisciplinary collaboration off the ground. Michiel Schwarz's residency at the Academy of Architecture and Reinwardt Academy was a first step, but so much more is possible. I believe very strongly that this kind of highly focused intervention is the most effective way of generating a multidisciplinary collaboration. Rem Koolhaas said "Good art is disruptive," and I'm convinced that programme's such as AIR can disrupt students in a creative way.'

Maria Hagen is head of communications and marketing at Amsterdam University, and former head of communications at Amsterdam University of the Arts.



Moving in the space



In her site-specific project at Westergasfabriek in Amsterdam choreographer Krisztina de Châtel and the students went in search of connections between body, environment and architecture in the public.

amateurs



At the Academy of Architecture, Erik Kessels, guest lecturers and international students examine the amateur origins of their artistry. Photos: Thomas Lenden

crossing landscapes



Jeanne van Heeswijk and her students took a cycle trip into their surroundings to study the functional, recreational and alternative use of the urban landscape. Photo: Thomas Lenden

Der Theatermacher



Photo: Jan van Breda

About the project

About the artists

Photo: Jan van Breda



**Steven Van
Watermeulen**

Since the appointment of Steven Van Watermeulen as artistic director of the Directing Department at de Theaterschool, the AHK has been supporting its new path by setting up a special AIR programme called *Der Theatermacher*. This programme confronts student directors with questions that get to the core of their personal artistic passions – questions about the impossible and the hidden, about radical, uncompromising theatre, and about what the artist means to society. They meet theatre makers with an important position in European theatre, because they are the ones who can select exceptional repertoire and raise relevant issues. In the 2014-2015 academic year the department hosted residencies by the celebrated directors Johan Simons, Katie Mitchell and Luk Perceval. The programme will continue in the 2015-2016 academic year with contributions from luminaries such as Paul Koek and Simon Stone.

The title of the *Der Theatermacher* AIR programme comes from the eponymous work by Austrian playwright Thomas Bernhard.

Photo: Thomas Lenden



**Johan
Simons**

Johan Simons is a Dutch theatre director, opera director and artistic director. He is the former artistic director of ZT Hollandia, NTGent and the Münchner Kammerspiele. Simons' work has garnered numerous national and international theatre awards. He currently heads the Ruhrtriennale in Germany, and he has returned to NTGent to take up the same position. From 2017 he will also take the helm at Theater Rotterdam, the collective formed by Ro Theater, Rotterdamse Schouwburg, Wunderbaum and Productiehuis Rotterdam. Johan Simons asked the directing students to stage three scenes from world theatre repertoire. Working with the celebrated Dutch actors Elsie de Brauw, Pierre Bokma, Bert Luppés and Jacob Derwig, they learned to translate their personal and radical vision into actor-friendly, open and well-defined directions for their scene from *Vrijdag, de Oresteia* and *Elementaire Deeltjes (Atomised)*.

Photo: Stephen Cummiskey



**Katie
Mitchell**

Katie Mitchell is a British director of theatre, opera and film. This controversial theatre maker has directed for the English National Opera, Salzburger Festspiele and De Nederlandse Opera. She is also an in-demand guest director in Germany. She is renowned for her rigorous preparation, her meticulous approach to the text, and her highly effective ability to tackle major subjects such as science, war, climate change and responsibility. Mitchell was the Stadsschouwburg Amsterdam's 'Brandstichter' in 2015. She is currently directing at the Koninklijke Muntschouwburg in Brussels in preparation for the world premiere of Dusapin's new opera *Penthesilea*. British director Katie Mitchell took her own book *The Director's Craft* as the starting point for conversing with students about her methodology, a selection of repertoire, and the importance of a creative team when sound, light, film and other visual elements are central to the work. The directing students held a public HALf6 meeting at de Theaterschool on this subject.

Photo: Patrick de Spiegelaere



**Luk
Perceval**

Flemish actor and stage director Luk Perceval is also the founder of Het Toneelhuis in Antwerp. He has directed at several theatre companies, including Münchner Kammerspiele and NTGent, and he is a former artistic director of Thalia Theater in Hamburg. He is currently working on part one of the three-part *Liebe. Trilogie Meiner Familie*, after Emile Zola's twenty-part cycle of Rougon-Marquart novels. Perceval's focus is on the family as a microcosm of all the problems and phenomena encountered in modern society. All three parts will premiere at the Ruhrtriennale. Luk Perceval and his dramaturge Benedikt Haubrich worked intensively with the students on directing methodology, with a particular focus on the psychological and physical embodiment of text. They asked: What does an actor need in order to engage in a meaningful way with the text?

The Directing Department's motto:

'A young man who does not fight and conquer has missed the best part of his youth, and an old man who does not know how to listen to the secret of the brooks, as they tumble down from the peaks to the valleys, makes no sense: he is a spiritual mummy who is nothing but a rigid relic of the past.'

(Jung 1967)

More than craft alone

**Steven van Watermeulen
interviewed by Robbert van Heuven**

Flemish actor Steven Van Watermeulen was appointed head of the Theaterschool's Directing Department at the start of last year. He's not one to rest on his laurels though, and he likes nothing more than getting out on the work floor, helping students get engaged with their course and their own artistic passions. 'This programme can be as ultra-personal as it needs to be.' Van Watermeulen put the department on a new path with *Der Theatermacher*, the AIR programme in which students confront essential questions about their own artistic passions; about the impossible and the hidden; about a radical and uncompromising form of theatre; and about what the artist means to society. This year the department hosted residences by the celebrated directors Johan Simons, Luk Perceval and Katie Mitchell.

Why would an actor choose to lead a directing programme?

'As well as being a theatre actor I'm a theatre maker with a background in both black box and traditional theatres. So, as an actor, I don't solely focus on the role I'm playing; I actually work alongside the director and we figure things out together and search for the dramaturgical motif. Besides that, I've been teaching for twenty years. Three years after graduating, Dora van der Groen, who I'd studied under, asked me to come back as a teacher. I later taught in Maastricht, where I was able to develop my own system.

I still completely agree with Dora that it's a good idea to get young actors and directors teaching the arts. As well as finding it easier to think on the same level as their peers, the main thing is that they learn for themselves. It compels them to think consciously about what they're used to doing intuitively, and to learn how to express that intuitive feeling.

I see myself mainly as an intermediary. I can initiate encounters, invite in big-name theatre makers, and link up my artists with others outside the school. I hope there's something to be gained for both parties. Teaching is a two-way street. When I asked Johan Simons to come in and teach as the Artist in

Residence for the *Der Theatermacher*, the first thing he asked me was, "What can I learn from it?"

In recent years, the Directing Department has focused mainly on repertory for the major theatre circuit. What do you think the programme should be focusing on?

'The text is important, but it's only one of the parameters in which the director works. In the end it will be the young people – the people we get in here – who will set the tone for the programme. Anyone who's got the flame of passion in them, that sense of urgency, should be able to come in. Then what it's about is what he or she wants. We've got a third-year student who disagrees with the way theatre system is set up and wants to reinvent it. My reply is: go ahead, do it!

We need to get our students inspired by veterans and young players alike, by people who know their craft and can help develop their identity. Aus Greidanus teaches them the craft – and more – using the 30 elements he believes are available to the director. They can choose to put it all aside again, but at least they've given time to considering them.

Sometimes students are afraid that by studying they'll lose grip on their own

artistry. Young people aren't willing anymore to accept anyone meddling with the core or their art. I know that feeling. But making theatre is also a craft, something you can study. It's really not going to rob you of your soul. One of our tasks is to reassure them about that.'

The department wants to focus the programme more on the autonomy of the director. Does society really want or need any more autonomous artists?

'For lots of people, the word "autonomous" brings to mind artists who just do their own thing. But the autonomous artists that spring to my mind are the likes of Luk Perceval, who makes very accessible theatre. He's got a powerful, authentic voice that people really want to hear. We need more artists like that. Not just in the theatre, but here, too. For me it's all about teaching responsible artists – to serve their artistic passions. If a play's got something powerful to say and it's made with heart, it'll pack them in at the theatres. As far as I'm concerned the programme can be as ultra-personal as it needs to be. The key that we hand over to them here could open any number of doors. There's got to be a space for theatre makers who want to work in established major theatres. And if someone's got the ambition to direct the opening of the Olympic Games, that's absolutely fine, too. You can only do that sort of work if you've also learned how to work in the tiniest of theatres.

I've noticed there's anxiety among students about the big stage of the major theatres. They feel like they're in for an unpleasant surprise if their basic dramaturgical concept isn't any good. You can't just wander onto the big stage armed only with your skill-set and expect to be allowed to have a go at directing – and that's certainly the case if you're taking text as your departure point. You need to know exactly why you chose the text and what you want to do with it. Form is all-defining when you're working in the larger theatres. I was in the cast for Luk Perceval's *Platonov* and *Platform* by Johan Simons, for example, and the acting style emerged out of the form of the play. If you haven't got the foundation right, then you'll be spending most of your time on the aesthetics – while in fact getting the form right can help you to lift up the material.'

Robbert van Heuven is a dramaturge and freelance culture and theatre journalist.

This interview previously appeared in De Theatremaker.

How do you go about structuring your 'ultra-personal' programme?

'How you deal with someone's artistic ambitions depends on the person in question. You need to tailor your services. What I've been doing is trying to get all the years to integrate. After all, you learn the best from each other. For first years, the programme can never be difficult enough – you need to turn them inside out. Their little ideas need to be stretched out; they need to be given height, breadth and depth. The more advanced students also serve as teachers for the younger ones, and that helps them learn to verbalise their intuitive ideas. That's really important, because you need to be able to get across what you want to do, preferably in a single well-turned sentence. That's the only way to get the people you're working with to nurture your ideas. You can just tell the designer you want something to be green, for example, but if you explain *why* you want it green they are much more likely to be able to come up with something good – maybe something you never even thought of before. Directors are often worried about relinquishing control – "That's how I want it, so that's how it's going to be" – but what you really need to do is put your ideas on the table early on, to activate the intuitive powers of the other people involved.

That's why we recently brought in 25 actors from all over the place – from the theatre world, performance, the commercial sector. We interrogated them for a few days. We asked, 'What buttons to I need to push to get you where I want you?' Each actor answered differently. Next season we want to have a week when ten directors come in with their designers, costume and lighting designers, and grill them about their specific work processes.

I inherited my fourth year students from my predecessor. Right now they're working on their graduation show. In the run-up to the rehearsals, we really put them through a cross-examination. We wanted to know what they wanted and why? There's a sense of liberation now they've realised that they've been set free from the text. They've liberated their own style, so they can choose whichever way they want to go. Theatre needs to be a dissenting voice. If you don't want me falling asleep it's got to surprise me, stimulate me, make me see new colours. And if you want to do all that, you'll need more than the craft alone.



HALf6 with Johan Simons and Adelheid Roosen. Photos: Thomas Lenden



Henk
Schut



Photo: Anne Douqué

Henk Schut

When I Give I Give Myself en andere projecten

By Saskia Monshouwer

Making film, theatre and music demands a combination of multiple artistic disciplines. Take Federico Fellini and Nino Rota, for example, or Toneelgroep Amsterdam and frequent collaborator artist Maze de Boer. When it comes to music theatre, such as that made by Heiner Goebels, the composition of the group of artists involved is often even more varied. As a rule this multifaceted form of collaboration rarely comes to the fore in arts education. The Master of Education in Arts at the Amsterdam University of the Arts, however, devotes explicit attention to interdisciplinary artistic practice through modules such as Interdisciplinary Artistic Collaboration, developed and run by Henk Schut. For this AIR project he works alongside co-teacher and researcher Diane Carp who documents Schut's method and place it in theoretical context.

Schut is an artist with a unique vision who works primarily on music and multimedia productions as a concept developer, director and project leader. We discussed his practice, one that is complex, elusive, experimental and successful. In 2014 he worked with the Van Gogh Museum on two projects that expanded on a series of visual and auditory pieces, making the *Van Gogh Mile* and designing and curating the *When I Give I Give Myself* exhibition. Both projects bear witness to the growing interest of museums and other organisations in exploring the social arena in interdisciplinary art projects.

Sixteen years in London

Following in the footsteps of the Education in Arts masters students I visited Schut at his studio and workshop in the former shipbuilding hangar on the NDSM wharf in Amsterdam. Having chosen to meet on the north side of Amsterdam's IJ waterway, I took the opportunity to wander past the new building developments in the area. On arrival at NDSM, Henk greeted me at the entrance and we went inside, into the quiet of the building; the immense, cavernous structure swallowed up all the surrounding sound – even of the

insistent drilling and hammering. 'What a space, eh?' grinned Schut as we ascended the metal staircase. 'That's one of the first things I want the students to experience, that sense of space – of industrial proportions. It's a completely different feel from the inner city.' We seated ourselves at a long table, the walls lined with metal storage racks crammed with lamps and tools. At the rear of this large space a young woman sat working, hunched over her laptop.

Could you share something about your background? You've done so many things!

'I started off as a fine artist, and after graduating I had the choice of going to the Rijksacademie in Amsterdam or the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art [RADA] in London. I went for the RADA, and it was a decisive choice for my career. Actually I had to start all over again twice: first in London when I was studying there and then again later when I came back to the Netherlands. But it's almost impossible to overstate the importance of the training I got there. RADA was organised in a very different way from what I was used to in the Netherlands. The team of teaching staff was really small, all of them artists, actors and directors with their own professional practice; and then you had us, the students, and we had to



Photo: Henk Schut

About the project

Visual artist Henk Schut was the Artist in Residence for the Master of Education in Arts in 2015. He has already been attached to the masters for some time, developing interdisciplinary educational programmes, and this versatile international practitioner has been an important source of inspiration from the students. During his tenure as AIR, Schut had the opportunity for an entire programme cycle to systematically study and document this specific educational practice, working in collaboration with co-teacher Diane Carp. Henk Schut produced his own visual record of the processes that took place between himself and the students, and among the students.

Henk Schut

Henk Schut is an artist, filmmaker and theatre and opera director whose frequent site-specific projects often take place at unconventional locations. After graduating from the Academy of Fine Art in Education he went on to study London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. He then lived and worked in London for sixteen years, as an artist and director. In 1992 he received two nominations for the Laurence Olivier Award and won the Barclays New Stages Award. In 1994 he represented the Netherlands at the quadrennial exhibition in Prague. From 2000 to 2008 Schut was the artistic director of Dogtroep, where he made several large-scale productions and installations. He works on his installations and collaborates with multidisciplinary artists at his studio in the former NDSM shipbuilding yard in North Amsterdam.



This installation entitled *In Between* was part of the *Masks and Sculptures from Ivory* exhibition at the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam. Photo: Tom Lieveense

decide for ourselves what we wanted to do. That produced to some pretty remarkable things.

I stayed in London and went on to work with the English National Opera and the Indian writer Vikram Seth. We collaborated on an adaptation of *Hamlet* in which all the dialogues were performed using only the eyes – just imagine that! And there was really interested audience wanting to watch it. And then there was the time we were looking for somewhere to make and perform a new production. In the end we decided on Plymouth, a town with large natural harbours. Ships sail from there to go whale watching in the Bay of Biscay – we even got to swim with dolphins. All in all it was a very liberating and valuable experience. There was space there. I stayed in London for sixteen years.'

Interdisciplinarity

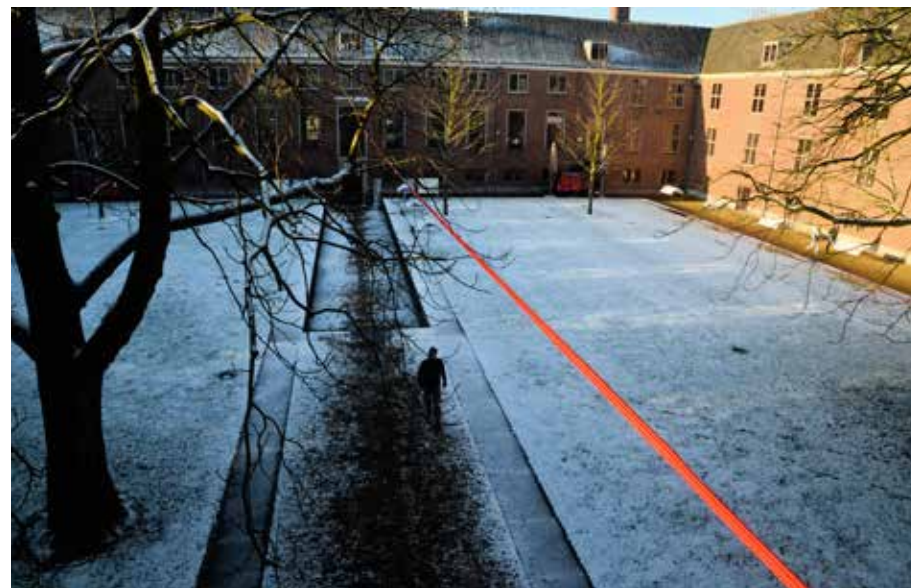
Schut talks with great enthusiasm about England. He is articulate, he communicates with his eyes, and he seems to want to emphasise each sensory experience he describes, whether it's the sensuality of swimming with the dolphins, or the powerful silence of reciting dialogue using only the eyes. As well as being abiding personal interests, the senses of touch, smell and hearing recur as motifs in his stage work. After watching the trailer for *Tallis in Wonderland*, a play Schut made in 2009 with the British musical ensemble I Fagiolini, I couldn't shake the feeling that the central subject is the ear. In this piece, the performance of a series of sixteenth and seventeenth century compositions is interrupted by whispering and other sounds. This has the miraculous effect of intensifying the listening experience rather than distracting from the music, waking you up and triggering a better understanding of the

structure of these acappella pieces. *Tallis in Wonderland is a wonderful piece, and your influence on it is clearly evident. What does interdisciplinary collaboration mean to you?*

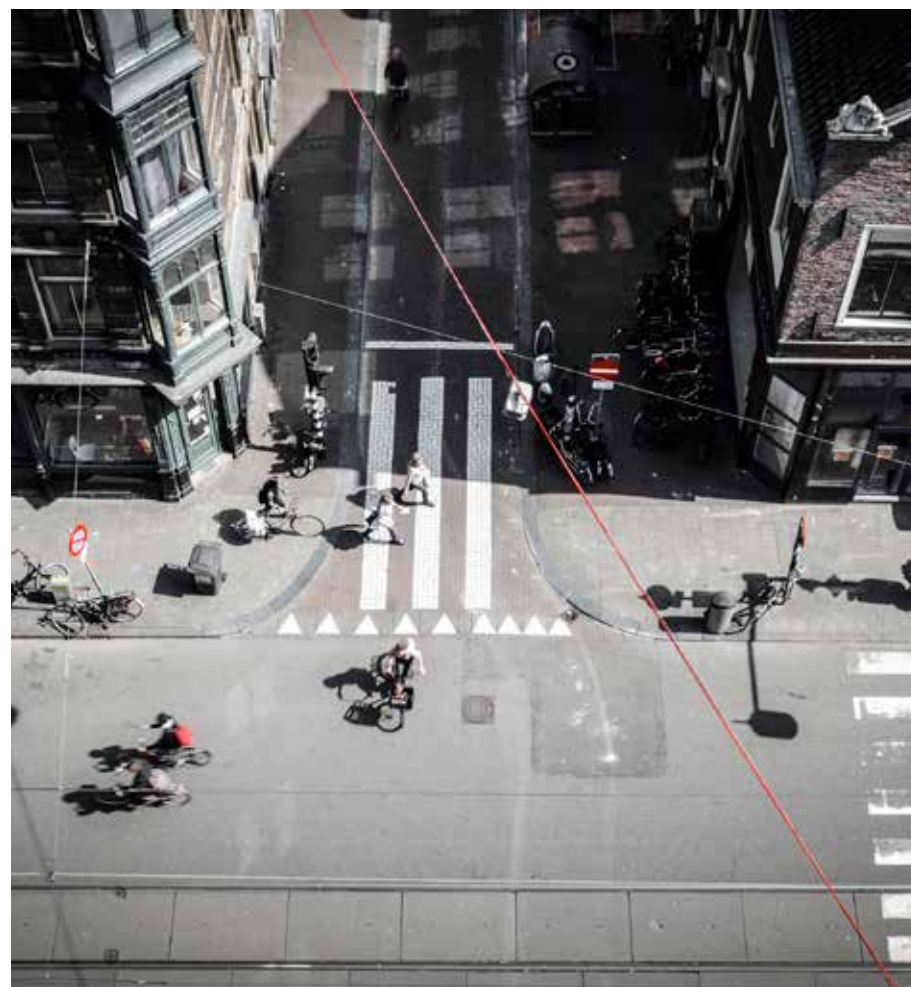
'What's essential to this kind of collaboration is that the artists follow their own path. They stand together, follow their own line, and operate autonomously. Compare it to Japanese Noh theatre, in which the actors and musicians appear to be operating independently of one another. Usually, at the start of a piece, a single actor enters the stage. He doesn't look at you.' Schut stands up, walks to the door and demonstrates: 'The face is turned diagonally away from the audience, and he allows silence to fall. Then the musician starts with his own motif. They're very different, but they still reinforce one another. His silence contrasts with the sound to create a particular kind of tension. The Japanese call that tension *Ma*. Another example is the complete silence after a performance by drummers who've been drumming as if their lives depended on it. It's a magical moment that kind of sucks you in.'

So this kind of 'essence of sound', for example, is one of the things I want my students to experience. That's how you become ware of its potential. You can use it as material. So, for instance, you can use the space itself as an instrument. In Noh theatre you'll find something similar: they put vases under the stage that work as sound boxes and that allows them to use the floor to make music. The search for essential experiences was fundamental to this AIR programme. We're getting together eight times and working on a variety of topics. It's not theoretical. It's really all about artistic research. The course connects with the artistry of the students. It's not about final product; it's all about

2.2 km



red thread



The *Van Gogh Mile* is a red thread 2.2 km in length marking the route between the Van Gogh Museum and the Hermitage. Photos: Artery

the working process.' Both Schut and Carp stress how important it is that students place limits on their enquiry. 'In the discussion classes we devote lots of time to how you formulate your artistic problem. Instead of, "I want to do something about death," it could better be, "We're going to listen to the silence." The realisation that silence and death are related and that they can be connected in different ways comes naturally out of that. This places the participants— many of whom are professional educators — back in the position of being students.'

The common thread

The way Schut talks about students has its roots in his own work, where he is always seeking to identify and escape conventions. Although he initially found an outlet for his visual and aural discoveries in music theatre, he is now increasingly taking his spatial experiences and sound to sites originally designed for static exhibitions. A good example of this tendency is his 2014 installation *In Between*, which was part of the *Masks and Sculptures from Ivory Coast* exhibition in Amsterdam's Nieuwe Kerk. In it Schut explores whether an artistic intervention (*Ma*) can make a positive contribution to the exhibition, following his first commission from the Van Gogh Museum.

In 2012 the Van Gogh Museum invited Schut to find a solution for a situation that arose due to renovation work closing the museum for seven months: a selection from the museum's collection was going to be on view at the Hermitage, around two kilometres its home on the Museumplein, and there was a concern that visitors would find this confusing. Schut created a walking route between the two sites with a work entitled *Van Gogh Mile*, comprising a variety of visual and audio artworks. The route was marked out using a 2.2 kilometre-long red thread running right across the city, high in the gables of the houses along the way. 'After I was approached by the museum I started thinking about Van Gogh's work. His drawing style led me to the idea of this red thread, which represents a drawn line. Van Gogh wrote in one of his letters that the colour red has an intrinsic value — it doesn't stand for anything else; it's simply red. Then we started working out how the line could run.'

Was your experience as part of interdisciplinary productions helpful in realising these projects?

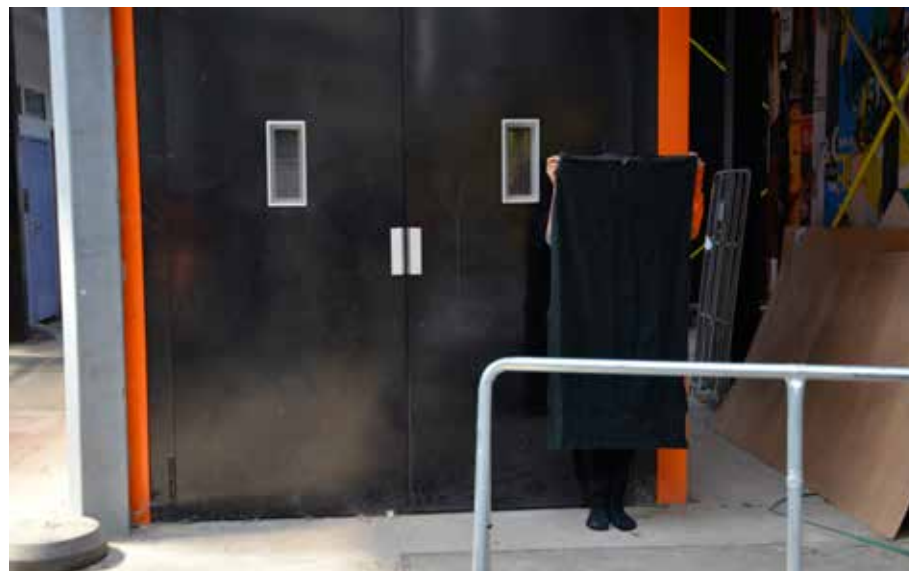
'Production for *Van Gogh Mile* was a real challenge. The cord needed to be taut, otherwise it wouldn't work, so we needed to find points where we could secure it. Did you know that every lamppost in Amsterdam has got its own number? And that all the trees are registered? A tree surgeon came along to see if they were strong enough to hold the cord. We needed to cross the Skinny Bridge [Magere Brug, near the Hermitage]. I'm busy now with the documentation for the *Van Gogh Mile*. There was so much going on in the production phase, and that's really worth documenting. Maria Barnas, one of the participants in the *When I Give I Give Myself* exhibition, told me that I could easily bring all those stories together in a book.'

Schut takes me to another table covered with photographs of Amsterdam houses pasted together to form streets. This is the beginning of the visualisation and documentation of the red line.

That project culminated in the Van Gogh exhibition that's still running as we speak

'Yes, it's called *When I Give I Give Myself*, and it's been put together to mark the 125 years since Van Gogh died. I'd read all of Vincent van Gogh's letters while making *Van Gogh Mile*, and I sent specially selected extracts to 23 artists — the likes of Anish Kapoor and Arnon Grunberg — and asked them if they could respond to the texts with work of their own. While I was reading the letters I stumbled on some similarities I wanted to share with the artists. It's wonderful that these letters exist! Van Gogh was both an artist and an intellectual. The connection I wanted to make had to do with space, with the making of choices and the taking of risks. As an artist you've got to be able to reveal yourself.' There was too little time available to discuss the exhibition in detail — that's unfortunate, because the enthusiasm of the museum staff and organisation suggests that Schut has made a valuable contribution to their search for new forms of presenting art. The juxtaposition of sound, music, movement, spatiality, text and image is simply a delight. As I was about to leave, Schut played me a sound experiment he is working on. There emerged from speakers in various configurations the gorgeous sounds of murmuring female voices talking about the Styx; one experiment is not yet complete, but another has already begun.

Saskia Monshouwer is a writer and curator.



Master of Education in Arts students working at Henk Schut's studio at the former NDSM shipyard in North Amsterdam. Photos: Henk Schut



Photo: Henk Schut

ON
AIR

Helmut Dick



Photo: Thomas Lenden

ACADEMY OF FINE ART



Photo: Saskia Monshouwer

About the project

Helmut Dick is heading *The Genius Loci and Other Invisible Forces* AIR programme at the Academy of Fine Art in Education for the duration of the 2015-2016 academic year. From 2016 the academy will be housed in Grootlab, the former Shell Technologies laboratory in North Amsterdam. In his role as AIR, Helmut Dick will take responsibility for embedding this relocation in an ambitious on-site educational project. Together with invited artists, experts and students Dick will explore a wide spectrum of opportunities for art beyond the studio walls, using unconventional 'materials' and social energy in this rapidly developing part of the city. The programme includes practical assignments for the new Art and Environment course, theoretical reflections (in collaboration with fellow tutor and philosopher Jappe Groenendijk), and activities open to the public.

Helmut Dick

Helmut Dick studied at Amsterdam's Rietveld Academy and the Sandberg Institute, and his post graduation visual art focused on sculpture and performance. He was twice nominated for the Prix de Rome in 2003, and he won its Competition Project Award. Dick is an active artist making multidisciplinary art for the public space, and he teaches and exhibits regularly in the Netherlands and internationally. Dick often conducts research into the qualities of specific places. He is particularly drawn to the influence of the mind-set of local people and artists on their conscious or unconscious living environments. Dick either visualises these qualities or incorporates them in his work.

Helmut Dick:

The Genius Loci and Other Invisible Forces

On urbanisation and the sublime

By Saskia Monshouwer

The contemporary living environment is an bewildering mishmash of urban and natural environment, industrial and agrarian activities, houses and infrastructure, the old and the new, the beautiful and the ugly, the useful and the useless, and the domesticated and the wild. The excitement sparked by entering this territory is captured in the title Helmut Dick chose for his 2015-2016 Artist in Residence programme at Amsterdam's Academy for Fine Art in Education: *The Genius Loci and Other Invisible Forces*.

The title invokes the 'spirit of place', the force, first conceived in Roman antiquity, that protects inhabited places. Over the centuries, these spirits have taken on an ever greater variety of forms: in 18th-century landscape architecture, they were the forces of nature; while in 20th-century architecture these protective qualities were ascribed to phenomenological characterisations. But from behind these familiar cultural-historical chaperones, Dick draws out some lesser-known and more disturbing guises, and that raises questions. What does he mean by 'invisible forces'? And are there powers that affect our surroundings besides the historical and social ones?

In conversation with Helmut Dick I sought to gain a deeper understanding of how he experiences his surroundings, and of the ideas and passions running through his method – because surely it is here, in his own work, that I will find an answer to my question.

Has the art you make always been inspired by your living environment?

'I'm deeply interested in the living environment. There's nature beyond it, but here people are building and living their lives. There is infrastructure, architecture, agriculture, manufacturing – and all these things hold meaning. As well as having a function, they express something about the cultural values held by the people who use them. They reflect mentality – and that's what I am really interested in.'

Did you make installations and interventions in outdoor spaces right from the start?

'When I first started at art school I mainly painted, but I soon swapped my paint for photography and film. Photography was a way for me explore artistic possibilities. I shot photos and films. Do you know *Koffiezetapparaat*, my one-minute film from 1999? That's one of my early works.'

I nod, recollecting the short film in which a man urinates into the water container of a small coffee maker – a hairy cactus standing where one would normally expect a glass jug to be, being sprayed with boiling hot bodily fluid.

Biological cycles

Your interest in the living environment seems to often revolve around biological cycles. Koffiezetapparaat also presents a cycle, in a sense, although I'm not sure that it's a properly functioning cycle. Where do all these references to biology, food supply and reproduction come from?

'When I was 16, I had no idea what I wanted to do. I didn't want to go to school, even though I was a good learner. By a roundabout way I ended up studying to become a gardener; I completed that course before I went to the art academy.'



The Cap – FC Hochburg / Die Muts – FC Hochburg takes the form of an enormous bobble hat on one of the castle towers, knitted in the colours of FC Köln. The text on the adjacent wall reads ‘1.FC Köln’. Photo: Thomas Wrede

Does your experience as a gardener play a role in your work?

‘It’s often useful, that’s for sure. When I was in Berlin in 2001 making *Slaveld zo groot als een torenflat / Lettuce Field as Big as a Sky Scaper Building*, I knew all about how to manage the soil and how long it would take before the lettuces could be harvested – it was about three weeks. But it would be a misunderstanding to say that my work is all about ecosystems and biology. For example, my 2012 piece *Voorangsdome / Priority Dome* is about neither biology nor nature – it’s about traffic.’

Voorangsdome / Priority Dome is an eight-ton dome eleven metres in diameter and six metres high. It’s been placed on the roof of the Middelzeehuys building in Leeuwarden – it’s the home of the national water authority and the rural area department. The construction reflects a thought about the Netherlands – you can see that it’s covered with 250 ‘priority’ road signs. So as well as the pattern of bright yellow squares forming a cheerful contrast with the modern white building, the message appears to be that in the Netherlands everyone always gets – or wants – priority.

Slaveld zo groot als een torenflat / Lettuce Field as Big as a Skyscraper Building is a 1200 square meter field in which Dick cultivated 10,000 lettuces. The field’s shape and size mirrors the facade of a fourteen-storey tower block in Gropiusstadt, near Berlin, and gives the spectator an idea of the enormous size of this modernist edifice; one rarely stops to think about just how many families dwell in this sort of building. Perhaps the work will feed into the discussion about the shadow cast by such dwellings. It also contains references to the food supply for urban conglomerations.

Hooligan kings of the castle

Your work can sometimes give the impression it’s very concerned with social issues. Is that the case?

‘“Concerned” isn’t the right word. My work is certainly not ‘socially engaged’, if that’s what you mean. It’s not intended to create encounters, although in Berlin I took a great interest in social interaction in the area. The lettuces were handed out for free, and that prompted interesting interactions. But my interest is more remote, more abstract. I’m interested in urban areas, especially the outskirts and peripheries. They form an archetypical border. That’s where you will find the big housing projects and estates – there’s the Bijlmer in Amsterdam, the Banlieues of Paris, and there’s Gropiusstadt in Berlin. There’s a plenty going on in these neighbourhoods. There are loads of people living in these places, and it’s interesting to look into what life is like there. How does the environment – the modern and other kinds of architecture –function? What happens when you stack people on top of one another? What are the underlying messages being conveyed by this sort of environment. For instance, modern architecture is now facing heavy criticism. People don’t want concrete, they say. What they want is their own little house and a garden. But both phenomena say something about the way we think.’



For Slaveld zo groot als een torenflat / Lettuce field as big as a Sky Scaper Building Dick planted 10,000 lettuces in front of a tower block in Gropiusstadt, Berlin. Photos: Lothar M. Peters, Helmut Dick

Although you say you’re work isn’t socially engaged, you certainly seemed to reach out to the audience in De muts FC hochburg / The Cap – FC Hochburg, the major project you made in 2004 at Ringenberg Castle in Hamminkeln [a German village near the motorway to Oberhausen].

‘The visitors to the castle were key to the work in Ringenberg. I was enquiring into what moves people to visit castles, and I arrived at the idea that probably everyone wants to be king with a castle at some point. Surely that’s one of the most important motivations underlying people’s fascination with castles. Then an interesting connection came up with football, where you’ll find frequent references to aristocratic titles. There’s the phrase ‘king football’, for example, and Franz Beckenbauer’s nickname, The Kaiser [which in Germany also refers to Keizer Wilhelm II]. So then I came up with the idea that it would be fun to have German football fans being the kings of the castle. That’s why on one of the towers there’s a woolly hat in the colours of FC Cologne and “1.FC Köln” written on an adjacent wall. In fact it took a lot of effort to get the hat knitted, and placing it on the castle tower was quite something in itself, but it hasn’t got much to do with the crux of my work.’

Mentality and mystical experiences There’s an anarchistic note to much of your work, and a bizarre sort of humour that suggests you might be searching for a social subconscious, in a similar way to the American artists Paul McCarthy and Eric Fischl, for example. What suddenly sprang to my mind when I was watching Koffiezetapparaat was The Sleepwalker, that iconic painting from 1979 that you’d see so often



in reproduction in the 1980s. It’s a view from behind of a young adolescent boy standing naked in a paddling pool in a garden, probably a suburban garden. It’s a very suggestive image. Would you say that you try to create a sense of unease?

‘You use the word “subconscious”, but I’d say “mentality”. It’s all about peripheral experience, things you can’t control. My 2007 work *Eengezinswoning Rizoom / The Single Family House Rhizome* was about achieving that horror effect you get from a rootstock, from the idea of something proliferating rampantly underground, like you see in science-fiction films, and then suddenly rising above the surface of the ground. So that’s why you see this small house rising out of the ground among all those lovely pink mansions in a German suburb. Our environment simply isn’t designed in a systematic way. Not everything you see is functional, because the environment also reflects the mentality of its users and inhabitants. If you look at it properly, you can divine the way we think. But perhaps there’s more so it than that. In the past, mystical experiences were often associated with nature. When people talked about the sublime, it would be the untamed, uncultivated nature of volcanoes and mountains. In our times nature has all but disappeared, and there’s almost nothing left that’s wild and uncultivated. So I sometimes wonder whether it is possible to find an equivalent experience in an urban context. I believe that art can create situations that make this mysticism tangible. Through art, you can learn to see the mentality that plays a role in defining the environment. He learns to recognise and understand people’s behaviour and rituals.’

Saskia Monshouwer is a writer and curator.

Dome with



250 priority signs



Helmut Dick's *The Priority Dome / De Voorrangskoepel* takes the form of a dome placed on the roof of the Middelzeehuys in Leeuwarden. The construction is covered with 250 priority signs.
Photos: Helmut Dick

Programme overview AIR Helmut Dick

The Genius Loci and Other Invisible Forces comprises a number of modules connecting the Academy of Fine Arts in Education with other communities:

The new Art and Environment programme

Third-year Fine Arts in Education students: co-led by Aldo Kroese

Contemporary art practice sees artists and designers responding to the local and global environment to explore matters such as social structures, networks, political organisations and media. Working with the subject covered by *The Genius Loci and Other Invisible Forces*, the students make an individual or group work with raw material is society. This module concludes with an on-site public presentation in North Amsterdam.

The Genius Loci and Other Invisible Forces optional interdisciplinary course

with Theatre in Education students, co-led by Jappe Groenendijk

This optional course sees students exploring the theoretical underpinnings of *The Genius Loci and Other Invisible Forces* by reading and discussing theoretical and philosophical works by the likes of Alain de Botton, Marc Augé, George Perec, Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, Nicolas Bourriaud and Claire Bishop. This part of the programme concentrates on philosophical contemplations of mainly human-made landscapes, places and spaces, as well as the social phenomena reflecting them. Students will also come together to attend lectures and film screenings that form part of the AIR programme. The guest speakers will place the works viewed in a more universal context to present a range of practices that reveal immaterial (and often social) relationships, processes or events. This will introduce students to the broader potential within this more spacious understanding of art and work.

Public events

- Film screening
Ausländer Raus by Christof Schlingensiefel: 21 september 2015.

Lectures:

- Helmut Dick: 31 August 2015
- Tilmann Meyer Faye: 7 September 2015
- Mariëlle Videler: 5 October 2015
- Wapke Feenstra: 2 November 2015
- Matthias Schamp: 30 November 2015
- Nils van Beek (TAAK): 11 January 2016
- Libia Castro and Olafur Ólafsson: 26 February 2016
- Metahaven: 18 April 2016
- Stephen Wilson: 27 May 2016
- project presentation and party in North Amsterdam (venue still to be confirmed): 10 June 2016.

Photo: Saskia Monshouwer



explore

North Amsterdam



Helmut Dick explores the North Amsterdam area with students from the Academy of Fine Art in Education. Photo: Helmut Dick

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