

LEARNING TEMPORARILY

How can we become
*a meantime?*¹

Clare Butcher

¹ Alessandra Pomarico, 'Situating Us', in: Ana Paula Pais & Carolyn F. Strauss (eds), *Slow Reader*, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017, p. 218.

It's quiet. Too quiet. The small geometric house in a line of others, like it has finally fallen asleep. The polder winds rustle the ring of trees surrounding the timeless village – the only trees for kilometres. On the dusty stripped floors of the family-sized flat, dead flies have been swept to the corners and makeshift curtains erected by the now resting strangers on yoga mats and wrapped in sleeping bags. It's the first night of the island. Dawn is far away.

Like any orientation moment of first-meeting, a mingled awkwardness and excitement imbues the first days of a study programme. This, The School of Missing Studies, is part of an ongoing project by artist-duo Bik Van der Pol that “[calls] for a space to turn existing knowledge against itself to affect our

capacity to see things otherwise, to trust that seeing,

and to set one's own pedagogical terms.”² And, within

the language of these aims, this orientation, like other modules of the course, is called an ‘island’ with the dual

intention of challenging the nomenclature of conventional Masters study, while astutely recognising the somewhat isolating nature of a postgraduate learning process. But the short-term production of other kinds of spaces of learning is always tempered by the surrounding waters. And intensity, as Leanne Simpson reminds us in her text *Islands of Decolonial Love*, should not be confused with intimacy.³

³ Leanne Simpson, *Islands of Decolonial Love*, Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2013, p. 25.

Now numbering fourteen, immanent and past, the temporary programme strand at the Sandberg Instituut was initiated in 2011 by Sandberg Instituut Director Jurgen Bey as a means of “aligning the instituut with

the dynamics of contemporary society [...] [and] developed according to urgent world issues.”⁴ And while

one could argue that *all* educational endeavours are by their very nature temporary, the following is a

meandering passage through some topical islands, inhabited by the organisers, tutors and participants within these *particularly* temporary programmes. The observations posed by the interviewed voices herein bridge with broader issues at stake in the complexities of institutional habits and the privileges of study, inviting us to consider whether the particularly temporary programme could be a means of unlearning the structures of the academic project. And if so, how could these short (sometimes sharp) interventions in the long life of an institute create a *meantime* in which the experiences assembled within such interventions are not merely temporary? A former participant in one such programme myself,

² Bik Van der Pol (ed.), *School of Missing Studies*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017.

⁴ See: the Sandberg Instituut website: <https://sandberg.nl/background-information>

I am also an educator from Southern Africa where the politics of tertiary education find themselves tossed on deep seas of colonial pasts and exclusive presents,⁵ compelling me to further question what is meant by 'dynamics' and 'urgencies' on temporary islands of...

5 See a recent set of edited articles on the #FeesMustFall movement in South African universities published in 2017 by the CSVr, Johannesburg: <https://csvr.org.za/pdf/An-analysis-of-the-FeesMustFall-Movement-at-South-African-universities.pdf>.

... IMPERMANENCE AND INDEBTEDNESS

I recently read a response to a Master's thesis, where the respondent challenged the student writer about the temporal limitation of the 'community' being invoked by the project. While the student's intentions were radical – seeking in-depth engagement that create conditions in which strangers and neighbours can be vulnerable in the sharing of ideas and methods – the time and space for vulnerability is a privilege,⁶ and in this case, was limited to the student's presence and available bodies of participants. To utilise that privilege for the constructing of socially-enabling models that have a more sustained duration is desirable, and indeed promised by the myth of academic inquiry as something slow, long-term and committed. Alessandra Pomarico of the Free Home University states however, that "in times of social and environmental catastrophe", it is the "formation of temporary autonomous zones of learning" that will constitute the change we hope for in modes of knowledge production.⁷

6 Simpson, (note 3), p. 24.

7 Pomarico (note 1), p. 208.

While the term 'temporary autonomous zone' or 'TAZ' has been emptied out with overuse in various political and academic circles, the possibility of establishing a structure capable of short, sharp interventions into the academy's power structures and bypassing the Bologna Process's bureaucratic box-checking,⁸ is alluring for many art educational institutions who consider themselves radical, or in the least, experimental. But like science fiction writer Philip K. Dick insists, the best universes are the ones that hold together for more than two days.⁹

8 The Bologna Process is a series of ministerial meetings and agreements made between various (mostly Western) European countries about the state and standards of formal higher education in the region. See: https://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/higher-education/bologna-process_en.

9 Philip K. Dick, 'How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later.', 1978. Accessed through: https://urbigenous.net/library/how_to_build.html.

The catch comes when considering the generousities and genealogies of thought, practice and method which span the academic project over time and, some might argue, are the only things holding it together. Others might say it's money. But to be hopeful, *temporarily*,

this other economy – the one of thought, practice, methods shared across generations, geographies, applied and ‘autonomous’ fields – while currently falling apart, could still be a transformative ruin; capable of carrying and containing ways of learning beyond our own temporalities and cubicles. The temptation to do away with rather than to salvage these seemingly unredeemable structures is felt keenly by many. Gayatri Spivak in a talk on ‘generalism’ delivered in the context of the Maagdenhuis student occupation of 2015, encouraged her audience – many of us disillusioned students and teachers – to hang out a bit longer and work toward other ends within the damaged epistemes of the university machine.

“I really wanted to rethink what a Master’s programme could be,” says Lisette Smits, initiator of the temporary programme, Master of Voice, which ended with the last academic year in Summer 2018. “I saw many young practitioners who were using their voices in their art work,” says Smits who wanted to address throughout the cross-disciplinary programme, “Is this use of voice the last thing that artists have which cannot be easily appropriated – a strategy of resistance? And how is this connected to forms of embodied knowledge and experience?”

For the University of the Underground – founded as a charity in the Netherlands by Dr. Nelly Ben Hayoun in early 2017 – the temporality of the programme forms just a part of an endeavour to sustain ‘100 Years of Education’ which, through private and public networks, supports “unconventional research and practices that apprehend, and challenge the formulation of culture, the manufacture and commodities of knowledge.”¹⁰

¹⁰ The University of the Underground’s Mission Statement. Accessed through: <http://universityoftheunderground.org/mission>.

The University of the Underground’s temporary iteration at the Sandberg is very much in line with Ben Hayoun’s vision of “breeding leaders who can change structures from within but also in line with Hannah Arendt’s philosophy to make education exist beyond nation-states”, says programme tutor Lauren Alexander. And though the University of the Underground’s Sandberg stint is still ongoing (its first stock of graduates will complete the course in Summer of 2019), the initiative’s approach to funding and branding have already caused many waves within its hosting Instituut.¹¹ The heated discussion generated within other departments by the University’s mode of operations, together with already strained inter-departmental relations and added social media attention, has raised vital questions

¹¹ For more details, see Angela M. Bartholomew’s article ‘Choose the worst evil’ in this series.

around the need for greater access to ‘knowledge’ resources within academic structures, and at what cost.

“We were never thinking that autonomy was possible, rather, we were interested in transparency about the state of a field, and its relations with other fields,” says Smits about her own process of constructing and resourcing the Master of Voice. Indeed, some of the temporary programmes could be regarded as extensions of a professional brand wherein the educational component of a Masters level course becomes an additional content generator of an existing studio or personal artwork. “Which, sure, holds a danger,” says Smits, “the curriculum becomes a part of an economic model without thinking about the consequences of this: how it determines the curriculum.”

In the economy of time=money and temporariness=precarity, rather than creating a climate of mutual concern for the state of fields represented in the Sandberg’s temporary programmes, these structural and political issues around how we might learn together have generated mutual suspicion – the only commonality being a shared sense of isolation. Temporary programme organisers meet separately from the ‘main departments’. Island style. Leaving those interested in the long-term project of education questioning: how can the time of study be one that produces ‘a post-neoliberal’ continuum in which the seemingly inefficient but ultimately educational processes of unlearning, listening and reimagining begin and go on?¹²

¹² See Pomarico (note 1), p. 212.

“You dedicate a lot of time to something,” says Smits, a time that evades easy capture in terms of outcomes or products, but rather takes the form of a trial and error process. Documentation of these processes, produced in the name of a possible ‘post-neoliberal continuum’ of self-evaluation and sharing with others, should be treated with scepticism in light of an at times easy appropriation of language and experience as ‘knowledge commodities’, and the use of students’ work as a mode of academy branding. Having said that, all programmes need

to comply with European Union credit systems with the help of external evaluations. They are also under increasing pressure to create an archive of content as well as reports and online visibility,¹³ as is the case with the University of the Underground according to Lauren Alexander. And though these forms of archival ‘evidence’ may seem commonplace within an academic

¹³ For details on what has been called ‘coercive accountability’ in the art academic context see a paper from earlier this year, A. Franklin’s ‘Auditing creativity? The UK Art School in the age of neoliberalism’, in: *Art, Materiality and Representation*, The British Museum & SOAS, London, 1-3 June 2018. Available from: <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/34600>.

context, the time it takes to construct them, to maintain them and to share them – to be “collegial, or to better the structure, or critique it”, says Smits – is not always valued within art academy structures. Here these archival practices are often regarded as forms of self-surveillance. A position maintained, some would say, at the expense of the institution’s evaluation and accreditation within academic rubrics.

The temporal debt Smits addresses is experienced by students as well, many of whose investments in these temporary programmes is not only financial but also intellectual, emotional and done in faith. The critical pedagogue Paulo Freire’s thinking around the ‘banking model’ of education is useful here, whereby students who are seen as vessels to be deposited into, invested in, find themselves bankrupt of agency and resources when dealing with the complicated world outside the classroom.¹⁴ The state of student debt today could be seen as a mutual experience of agentic bankruptcy – making visible the higher-education’s capitalist (and colonial) cycles of knowledge extraction and production.

14 See Paulo Freire’s ‘The Banking Concept of Education’, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* originally published in 1968 (the same year the Gerrit Rietveld Academie was founded).

Not knowing the curriculum in advance, many participants of temporary programmes find themselves contributing to the main structure and content of their programmes through self-organised workshops and talks with other departments to supplement perceived lacks in course content as well as feedback – which due to the lack of formal settings is often student-initiated. It was through the student body’s more intersectional interests and activities across ‘islands’, says Lauren Alexander, that she became more aware of the politics within the Sandberg Instituut at large.

And while the shared recognition of a fucked-up coalition through debt,¹⁵ should arguably create a more long-term solidarity in which *study* becomes a “mode of thinking with others separate from the thinking that the institution requires of you”,¹⁶ the temporariness of the indebted ‘exchange’

15 “[...] the student is not home, out of time, out of place, without credit, in bad debt”, and as opposed to credit, which is asocial, “debt is mutual. Credit runs only one way.” See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, New York: Minor Compositions, 2013.

16 Halberstam, p. 11.

between the ones who know and those who have yet to know is the only thing keeping afloat an already sinking academic paradigm. Could the kind of study which grapples with these seemingly fleeting but in fact very fixed power

structures also create a *meantime* in which other kinds of wisdom, other ways of learning together are imagined? Perhaps more questions (rather than answers) lie in the waters running between and beyond islands of...

...NOT KNOWING AND UNLEARNING

In a retrospective text contributed to a publication on one temporary programme, author Eloise Sweetman discusses the currency of intimacies and wisdoms which emerge in the time of temporary study. While the admission that 'I don't know' in a pedagogical setting is often met with the violence of correctional 'shaping,' 'instructing,' 'training,' 'developing' [of] the ignorant,¹⁷ Sweetman claims that rather than 'Mastering' in the process of acquiring a Masters,

¹⁷ Pomarico (note 1), p. 209.

'I don't know' is an 'appeal for intimacy' which opens up space and time for difficult encounters with one another.¹⁸ Encounters that go beyond the 'skilling' of a standard training in fashion, jewellery or designing democracy, inviting those participating to consider what is worth knowing about that field and why.

¹⁸ Eloise Sweetman, 'Roll On Roll On Phenomena (Until You Are No More),' in: Bik Van der Pol (ed.), *School of Missing Studies*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017, p. 141.

Within an art academy context, the value of not-knowing and reflecting on structures of authority are in principle well-guarded tenets. But are the luxuries of criticality and vulnerability possible within a space and time limited to the temporary? It might seem that there are far too many infrastructural waves to wade through before a community of strangers can plumb the potential depths of what it takes to think and learn together.

Whose names are on the tutor list? What sexy titles might cover the content? What are the ground-rules for engaging with each other when there are no protocols in place yet? Where are the parameters of 'our' aesthetic judgement? Am I a bigot if I use the wrong personal pronoun? Who decides what's on the reading list and how is the positionality of knowledge discussed? Can't my tutor just say they're sorry? – just some of the questions raised by myself and fellow participants in recent years.

It is within this discomfort of short-term not-knowing where the limits of care and coalition emerge. The islands' contours begin to form, the waters between get choppy. The material and immaterial conditions of how we get from here to there, of how we learn, of who we become, are made visible

and the practice-theory bridges are put to the test. Enough metaphor? A question then: how could a critical practice of temporary programming “support a paradigmatic shift toward pedagogical relations that refuses to reproduce oppressive, patriarchal, extractive, colonial patterns?”¹⁹

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Pomarico (note 1), p. 210.

But perhaps a not-knowing temporality could unexpectedly allow the time for a shift in the ways that we assess, construct curricula, and fund education, as well as be held accountable for all of the above.²⁰ The

precarious temporary programme – with its interven-

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Sweetman (note 18), p. 147.

tions of undisciplined approaches from multiple posi-

tions, engaging with multiple participants from many backgrounds²¹ – could demarcate “the perfect time for shredding innocent words and views”, and make for “discussions [which] may seem excruciatingly clumsy and seem to imply that lots of time will be spent” on keeping together rather than separating out, ‘form’ and ‘content’ from ‘context’.²²

21 The admissions procedures of the temporary programmes widely differ in terms of values and criteria and is not monitored by a single body in the Sandberg Instituut. To this date, there is no official policy at the Sandberg Instituut which formalises a recognition of diversity and equity in its admissions procedures. For further reading on an art academy admissions procedure case study, see Teana Boston-Mammah’s ‘The Entrance Gap’: <http://wdkamakesadifference.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/TheEntranceGap-TeanaBoston-Mammah-WdKaMakesADifference-Reader2017.pdf>.

Through subjective, personal and sometimes painful steps, it may be possible to build

22 Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, p. 288-289.

another kind of temporality, a time of study which can be exercised intersectionally and inter-generationally

between words, worlds and positions. “A different time is necessary,” says Alessandra Pomarico, “We need to [...] abandon the projection into the future and the insistence of a constant present. There are three generations before, three generations ahead, and then us in the middle.”²³

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Pomarico (note 1), p. 218.

It is in this mode that a collective ‘unlearning’ of the supposed values of knowledge and aesthetics as well as the privileges associated with those things can happen. The term ‘unlearning’ appears as *‘verlernen’* in German, the troublesome prefix *‘ver’* operates as an around-about gesture, an un-, mis-, estranged practice which “seriously means challenging the notion that [education] is

inherently unidirectional or consensus-oriented, [opening] up the possibility to critically reflect upon what is being conveyed in the first place...even [unsettling] knowledge.”²⁴

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Nora Sternfeld, ‘Learning Unlearning’, *CuMMA Papers #20*, p. 2, online: <https://cummastudies.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/cumma-papers-20.pdf>.

The scent of emotional labour expended by students in educating their teachers of late has a *'ver'*-ness about it. "Who's (I)earning in this relationship?" some have asked, as "not all knowledge brings power" and sometimes ignorance brings more.²⁵ Unlearning this relationship, according to Sternfeld citing Spivak, is imperative as a "process of actively interrogating the powerful divisions and always-already known power relations" in educational contexts, which are everywhere.²⁶ The 'positive destruction' of those oppressive structures, those damaged epistemes, and the forward-looking that this could allow "will only be possible by virtue of a simultaneous orientation toward the here-and-now and the past."²⁷

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Ibid., p. 7.

25 Ibid., p. 5.

27 Jimmie Durham, Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan, cited in Sternfeld (note 24), p. 7.

For temporary programmes the here-and-now is extremely close to the past – a 'constant present' perhaps but one that has a deadline. Making proximity simple but perspective complicated. The metabolising of complicated learning takes time, a time that is not often included in the curriculum. "The last day of the Masters was also my last day" says Smits, "I do this to continue my research but also to develop education." Leaving us with more questions around how the learnings and earnings of these experiments are transferred to another generation of practitioners: What is left of the short-lived community who coalesced around the ideas, personalities and possibilities offered within these experiments? How to trace the 'repertory of traces' offered by temporary programmes in ways that critically reflect on the products of research as a "process's repeated taking-shape,"²⁸ rather than fixing them as knowledge objects to be owned or branded?

28 See the Senselab's 'Go-To How-To Book of Anarchiving', Andrew Murphie (ed.), Montreal: Concordia University, Senselab, 2016, online: <http://senselab.ca/wp2/immediations/upcoming-distributing-the-insensibledec-10-20-2016/>.

While a number of the temporary programme teams are seeking to collaborate with new hosting art institutions and tertiary education structures, and some, as we already know, have a century-long timeline, the experiences, critiques and conversations begun in these programmes also live on in the bodies of participants.²⁹ The term 'curriculum' after all does refer to running a track quickly.³⁰ But perhaps there is something to be said for running that course repeatedly. A communal archive of educational

29 I've referred a number of times to a post-humous publication by School of Missing Studies by Sternberg Press in which many voices and contributors continued their reflections form the programme. Another reference here is the University of the Underground's statement that they intend to expand their remit into "nine new areas around the world", see their core tenets: <http://universityoftheunderground.org/mission/>; and the Master of Voice team have expressed an interest in continuing their process in another setting.

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A bit provocatively, I include a link to a 1859 article published in *The Atlantic* about the history of the curriculum within the ancient Greek Gymnasium, online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/05/the-gymnasium/305407/>; but more importantly, I must refer to a compelling event organised by the University of Amsterdam's Philosophy Department Programme Committee earlier this year, 'Decolonizing the Curriculum', 16 March 2018, <http://aihr.uva.nl/content/events/events/2018/03/decolonize.html> which is part of a much wider effort driven mostly by students, aiming to transform the university as a structure on various levels and in different cities around the Netherlands – a process which should include the Sandberg Instituut.

endeavours, which – when encountered in the spirit of the unlearning Sandberg Instituut, rather than reproducing (bad) habits – could allow for the shared demarcation of resting points, reflective protocols and supportive critical postures of those who came before, in the knowledge that these might not be useful now or next time...but maybe they will be. Hardly an island-style approach, the curricular interlocking of these *meantimes* is the continuum of a coalition: emerging and submerging between the waves.

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C O M M I S S I O N E D

C R I T I Q U E

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