

EVERYBODY
KNOWS,
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KNOWS¹

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¹ Leonard Cohen, 'Everybody Knows'
from *I am Your Man*, 1988, Sony/ATV
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P R E F A C E

The most important lesson I learnt from the School of Missing Studies² is to say ‘I do not know’, and allow myself to clamber down into the seclusion of darkness.

It has that pleasure of completeness, that as a graduate of Missing Studies that I spend my time in the aftermath (my career) immersing myself in not knowing and intimacy. The lesson comes from the slow burn of learning, coupled with experience, and from the advantage of distance.

² A temporary master programme (2013-2015) headed by Bik van der Pol at the Sandberg.

D O Y O U B E L I E V E I N A S A F E S P A C E ?

Everybody knows that the concept of a safe space is politicised and everyone has an opinion, just like we think we know what intimacy is. For example, a friend of mine believes that art school is not the place for safety. I thought I knew what a safe space was, but now I am doubtful because, in 2018, I came to realise that spaces – including the MA programmes – that tell you that they will care and protect you is pretty much bullshit. I listen to my friends, some of the bravest people I know, tell me how they have been treated poorly by organisers of ‘safe-space’ initiatives and programmes. It comes about because their ‘teachers’ think that because that they are white and cis that it’s better to be quiet and not take any responsibility for being the facilitators and caretakers of failing programmes. If placing the responsibility elsewhere is the maintenance of programmes of learning, and ‘transgression’, then I say we should shut them all down now.³

³ In my work as curator, artist, and teacher, I take this essay as a means to look at myself more closely and to hold myself accountable as a white cis woman who brings bodies together through art.

In this text, I look at the ‘safe space’ in terms of not knowing and intimacy and turn to the MA, the studio, the artwork, the exhibition as spaces that cultivate such an approach to the world. Such spaces can (but certainly not always) make room for new and different ways of acting, making, thinking, sharing, being in the world. Within not knowing and intimacy, one must be actively open and vulnerable through attentiveness, which I delineate as responsibility. By being so, what might we learn? Importantly, if we are to enter into not knowing, or what Rebecca Solnit calls ‘the patches of darkness’,⁴ should we not expect some kind of rigging system to make sure that we are not left for dead? That said, do I put too much faith in the systems and structures of the art and learning to keep

⁴ Rebecca Solnit, ‘Woolf’s Darkness’ in: *Men Explain Things To Me: And Other Essays*, London: Granta Books, 2014, p. 87.

myself and those around me safe? Where is art-as-community in the depths of not knowing, in the embrace of intimacy?

Besides why would anyone dare to share their not knowing in the space of intimacy when so many hear every day:

You are stupid.

Don't worry about it.

You are difficult.

I told you already.

We don't have time.

We don't have money.

What's the hurry?

We have organisational problems.

These are the rules.

It's not my fault.

You should do it.

Why are you so negative?

You should smile more.

Don't stress.

Maybe you are just weak?

You don't exist.

You don't exist.

You don't exist.

HOW CAN ANYONE BARE IT, LET ALONE A STUDENT?

To be a Master student, particularly in art, is to explore one's own practice with intention. The student steps into not knowing. I have never met an MA student that is not having a crisis of identity and questioning everyone around them. A Master student is part of a group of people who are searching for something in their work and themselves. They have realistic and unrealistic expectations. An adult student goes into the programme thinking that they know their lacks and gaps, but instead, they find themselves shaking the known – self, friendship, family, history, community, techniques, theories, materials, politics – to the ground. In my own Master history⁵, my colleagues⁶

⁵ I have two Masters: one in Arts Management from HKU, the other Master of Fine Art from Sandberg.

⁶ It will never stop feeling very weird to call my fellow students, colleagues, as if we were office workers.

and I were in a state of transition, making it a tender and at times volatile experience. Many of my classmates will tell you that they felt let down (and maybe still do?). I think they felt this way because they did not believe that the programmes were equipped to see their struggle for what it was. In hindsight, I have to ask if I even saw my classmates' pain? I remember times when I was so transfixed by my crushing self-doubt I wouldn't move from my desk for 10 hours straight. Would I even have the energy to see my teachers struggle because now I know that they did?

An MA is a profoundly emotional experience for student and teacher.
An MA is to be stripped entirely bare.

As a Sandberg student, I was immobile with the fear of not knowing, of showing my lack. Part of this insecurity, I think, came from rarely hearing people in authority such as teachers from kindergarten to Master say they 'don't know'. I didn't know it was okay. After the School of Missing Studies and when I became a teacher, I realised that I needed to cultivate and share my not knowing. My students (BA) would rather not speak for fear of taking the wrong step or saying the wrong thing. How could I teach them that it is okay if I was too scared to do it? From this experience, I have come to terms with the value of not knowing and intimacy as an essential aspect of learning, art making, and being in the world. The classroom, the studio, the artwork, the exhibition are all spaces of intimacy and not knowing. A space of safety is an actual place that you can be yourself, and together with others, you can explore not knowing and your vulnerabilities. In the MA, it is a space that is awkward, uncomfortable, shameful, but at the end of the day, there should be mechanisms set in place by those that initiated the programme and education system to help everyone through it. That is their duty of care, isn't it?

WHAT IS NOT KNOWING ANYWAY?

In Rebecca Solnit's essay *Woolf's Darkness: Embracing the Inexplicable* she says it is the task of writers to go into the dark with open eyes. I say that this is true for artists, budding or blooming: "that what we say will always be imprecise: There is so much we don't know, and to write truthfully about life, your own or your mother's or a celebrated figure's, an event, crisis, another culture is to engage repeatedly with those patches of darkness, those nights of history, those places of unknowing".⁷

⁷ Solnit (note 4), p. 87.

Not knowing is imprecise and tricky to share with others. It is messy and conflicted, which if we are all very honest with ourselves is something we don't feel like dealing in. My partner told this morning that 83% of the world's wild mammals have gone extinct since 1972, and I told him to stop telling me about it. I can't hear it, because I don't know what to do. Another rejection of uncertainty is to offer a flippant remark such as 'be positive', 'you can fight this', 'you'll grow out of it'. Entering into the not known means that there is no guarantee that you will ever become orientated again. No one wants to be lost forever, let alone in art school. There is the idea that it is always better to be in the light because we are told that knowledge is power. Better to weaponise it than appear weak. We are taught to be scared of the dark, of what we cannot see, and if we don't understand it then, of course, it doesn't exist. Women have long been left in the dark, and know very well that being in it is 'asking' for trouble. For a long time, and even still, there has not been a case for the not known, the darkness. It is a dumping ground for shame, ignorance, prejudice. Yet, it is in the face of violence, neo-nationalism, misogyny, greed, and the destruction of the environment that a different kind of not knowing is necessary and urgent.

NOT KNOWING IS VULNERABILITY.

The good news is that we can find a different kind of not knowing in art, beginning at art school. As it is well understood that the creative process is diving into a not knowing. Unfortunately, this quality of darkness, the not known, is quickly taken away from artists. Artist Ann Hamilton says that as an art professor she notices that her students are often expected to give away what they know:

[...] when you're making something, you don't know what it is for a really long time. So, you have to kind of cultivate the space around you, where you can trust the thing that you can't name. And if you feel a little bit insecure, or somebody questions you, or you need to know what it is, then what happens if you give that thing that you're trying to listen to away. And so, how do you kind of cultivate a space that allows you to dwell in that not knowing, really?⁸

⁸ Ann Hamilton, 'Making, and the Spaces We Share' on *The On Being Project*. Accessed through: <https://onbeing.org/programs/ann-hamilton-making-and-the-spaces-we-share>, on 10 October 2018.

⁹ Brené Brown, 'The Power of Vulnerability' on *TED talk*, 2010. Accessed through: https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability, on 20 October 2018.

Brené Brown, social worker and vulnerability researcher asked in a TED talk⁹ what happens if people in power, in

prisons, those in war or conflict were able to share their not knowing with each other. She asks what might a community look like if it allowed vulnerability in? I wonder what an MA art school programme would look like if not knowing was the norm? What would happen to those that take pleasure in dealing in prejudice or act as if it is not here? What if we listened to our colleagues, teachers, students, parents, partners, administrative staff, and hear their not knowing?

Many students want to see, hear the experiences of their teachers when they are lost and figuring out their way. One Sandberg friend told me that it was a relief when her Master tutor said to her that she too cries when making an artwork due to the pressure of having to know what it is straight away. Now, my friend no longer feels alone when she cries. She feels safe knowing that someone understands her. Still, how does one do this when it is not considered appropriate to share a general not knowing, let alone a total loss of control? I remember one time in my MA at the Sandberg that I became so distraught that I screamed that I hated myself because I was so stupid. I was horrified: is that what I really think? Unable to deal with it, I held that feeling away from me like a bad smell. Recognising this now in myself, I have to ask how we, in a learning environment, can share ourselves with others in such an intimate way when many of us might not dare to do it with ourselves? How can we be intimate with someone that would rather poke a hole in you? In the vulnerability of breaking down ourselves and our practices, we need to know that we are safe in our groups, educational programmes, and communities. Feminist theorist Karen Barad says, “[...] the sense of exposure to the other is crucial and so is the binding obligation that is our vulnerability, our openness[...].”¹⁰ Not knowing is where one is unfixed and remains unfixed. Intimacy, like not knowing in the case that I am writing for, is shared.

¹⁰ Karen Barad, ‘On Touching – The Inhuman that Therefore I Am’, in: *differences* 23:3, 2012: pp. 206-223.

CAN WE HAVE SPACES OF INTIMACY AND NOT KNOWING?

Everybody knows that intimacy is elusive, subjective, and difficult to articulate. Although, Svetlana Boym points out that it is close ‘to intimate’ to confess, or to state to make known.¹¹ In an art school wouldn’t that intimacy be shared visually, poetically, bodily, not limited to the voiced or the written? And by the way, aren’t artists already refining and examining themselves in the MA programme, dealing with their intimacies,

¹¹ Svetlana Boym, ‘Scenography of Friendship’ in: *Cabinet Magazine*, vol. 36, 2009/10. Accessed through: <http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/36/boym.php>, on 3 August, 2018.

anxieties, materialities, and sharing it? An intimacy with ourselves and with each other. When we step inside a studio, or an exhibition, and spend time with artwork, we are within the physical and ephemeral space of intimacy.

I wrote earlier that not knowing is to become unfixed, but it is not only an unfixing in an MA programme, it is where one needs to learn and experience in a group who will respond to your face. In the midst of intimacy, a classmate might find it more interesting to explore your shame and not their own. This is when not knowing becomes ignorance. For example, I remember when laughing with a British classmate when they called me a convict and the later realisation of what I was laughing at. It is not a joke. Unfortunately, despite our common history, we don't have a perspective to share. The same classmate had a lot to say about racism in my country Australia, a place she has never been, but was unable to fathom her history in connection to mine and how that darkness known and unknown is hers and mine. What she does is perpetuates colonialism.

Lately, I have been thinking a lot about shame, in the MA there is the potential to be confronted with it. Shame, Elspeth Probyn¹² writes, is the only way we can be intimate with ourselves. From this, I take it to mean

that we locate the parts of ourselves that we do not like or understand, and maybe we can change them, but perhaps we can't. So, intimacy is revealing to ourselves, and possibly to others, this shame. It requires mutual respect and shared responsibility. Deborah Bird Rose, a Professor of Social Inclusion, says: "responsibility, however, exceeds all guilt, it exceeds all my actions: responsibility is there for others, irrespective of what I have done".¹³ It took me a while to understand what this meant and I am still coming to terms with it. Right now I believe it means that my responsibility is not mine, it is about and for those around me. To be responsible is to be respectful, and not be self-congratulatory.

¹³ Deborah Bird Rose, 'Emmanuel Levinas - putting ethics first' on Philosopher's Zone. Accessed through: <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/philosopherszone/emmanuel-levinas---putting-ethics-first/3318430>, on 15 October 2018.

A safe space in art school is a concept about the condition of coming together with the agreement that there is respect for each other. Each other's body, ideas, and actions, even if you don't agree with those others, bodies, ideas, and actions. This means that there must be great restraint from sharing prejudices and also not getting confused as to why the gathering has been created in the first place.

There is a great deal of intimacy in this space, because there is an agreement to reveal oneself at that moment perhaps as unaware or unfamiliar at the start, but hopefully, at the end of the exchange (over time), there is a transformation from ignorance to responsibility for your actions and words. Hearing Mahzarin Banaji speak gives me hope for the MA programme and what is possible at the Sandberg:

It is my job to tell people to feel uncomfortable, to squirm, to go back and think hard about where they come from and so on. And now I'm being told that when I say that, I'm making somebody possibly uncomfortable. And I've argued forever this is a safe room in which we can say anything, and we will deal with it. Because if we don't, we've basically given up the most fundamental aspect of who we are and what we prize and value, and what I believe is at the heart of social change¹⁴.

¹⁴ Mahzarin Banaji, 'The Mind Is a Difference-Seeking Machine' on *The On Being Project*. Accessed through: <https://onbeing.org/programs/mahzarin-banaji-the-mind-is-a-difference-seeking-machine-aug2018/>.

In life and in art, we must make room for bodies and voices that are outside of the known. This is our responsibility. It is about respect. The space of not knowing and intimacy does not celebrate consensus or tolerance. Nor does this space accept ignorance. I believe intimacy is empathetic contact with which we can shift the balance of power. Not knowing can resist the structures that breed and celebrate violence, neo-nationalism, misogyny, greed and the destruction of the environment. Intimacy is both embrace and resistance, which decentres our current idea of community. We need artists, budding and blooming, to be part of the embrace and the resistance. We need it and we need the centres of learning to be spaces of not knowing and intimacy.

I hope for a lot in art school. Hope is taking action. Hope is improvisation. I have imagined a kind of rigging system to scale down into the darkness of not knowing. Such a system would require a harness, ropes, pulleys, carabiners, which we can understand as the infrastructure of an MA programme. The rigging system keeps you from falling to your demise, and you are not entirely alone as the human and more-than-human is all around you. The system is made up of bodies and entities, teachers, administrators, family, and classmates who make sure you are fastened in. Everybody knows that this is difficult, which is why it requires some training. In the end, you are on your own in the moment of the free fall in the darkness of practice, of identity, of politics. Perhaps you have a headlamp, but not the floodlight of the known. Instead there are smaller

flashes of light that enable you to glimpse what and who might be around you. Eventually, as the budding student blooms into the established artist, then hopefully the MA has prepared you to know how to give into the unknown to allow it to surround you, to immerse you within it.

Eloise Sweetman is a Western Australian curator, writer, teacher and artist based in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. In her work, she explores how intersectional co-responsibility is not bound to one institution or setting but instead enacted within and through a community and by her as an artist, curator, writer, and teacher. She has a Master of Fine Art, School of Missing Studies, Sandberg Instituut, Amsterdam and a Master of Art in Arts Management, University of the Arts Utrecht and Open Universities London. With artist Jason Hendrik Hansma, Eloise is co-founder and co-director of Shimmer, an exhibition, events and online platform in the Port of Rotterdam.

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