

# A LIST OF LONGINGS

Luiza Prado

A blank sheet of paper. A text cursor blinks on the white background with unnerving regularity. Paint slowly dries on a brush. A pencil sits, untouched. Time is now measured in terms of infection rates, incubation periods and statistics of death. There are no plans; no travel, no certainties. There is no tomorrow, only today. The present stretches into the unknown.

For the past two and a half months, a global pandemic has brought all cycles of what many had been accustomed to understand as normality to an abrupt halt. No aspect of life has remained untouched by COVID-19, a highly infectious illness spread – as far as we now know, in May 2020 – predominantly through contact with other human beings. Around the world, to varying degrees, streets had to be emptied, cafés and restaurants closed, and gatherings with friends, family and loved ones living in different households banned. With all social contact suspended, stillness became the only option.

Perhaps time stopped when notices of postponements, cancellations and redundancies started arriving – an ominous litany of unpredictable duration and deep repercussions for all those navigating the precarious life of freelancing, zero-hour contracts, gig work, migration and displacement. Perhaps it stopped when people yearning for closeness, for exchange, for collective experience, found themselves scattered across cities, countries, continents. Perhaps it stopped when borders became more and more ossified; the walls of countries, states, cities, neighborhoods, buildings, apartments and houses resonating, louder and louder, with the structures of power they materialise. Perhaps time stopped when loss crept closer and closer, and even being together in mourning became impossible. Insurmountable distances, amplified by the stillness.

This stillness did not take over, however, in quite the same way everywhere. Unlike most other European nations, the Netherlands initially adopted the approach known as ‘herd immunity’, which – instead of focusing on containing the virus by all means possible – starts from the premise that allowing the infection to spread in a controlled manner creates widespread resistance throughout the population. Implicit in this strategy is the idea that the consequent loss of human life, as well as the immense suffering inflicted on both healthy and sick, are fair prices to pay for maintaining a semblance of normality in society’s day-to-day activities. Ultimately, it is part of a larger political project meant to normalise the perception of certain lives as disposable, sacrifices at the altar of productivity and capital. A selective stillness, however, cannot prevent the suspension of time caused by a pandemic.

It is within this context that, on March 13th 2020, the Sandberg Instituut closed its doors – temporarily, but without a fixed date for reopening. Of course, at a time when uncertainty permeates the very air we breathe, shuttering the physical space of the institution is a necessity, rather than a choice. The Netherlands' official 'intelligent lockdown' strategy couldn't feasibly work within the busy, bustling context of a school. On top of which, the strategy had already been criticised by many experts<sup>1</sup> as potentially endangering the lives of people with conditions that make them more susceptible to the virus.

<sup>1</sup> Anna Holligan, 'Coronavirus: Why Dutch lockdown may be a high-risk strategy' in *BBC News* 5 April 2020. Accessed through: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52135814> on 25 May, 2020.

I was first invited to write a 'commissioned critique' piece on the Sandberg Instituut during a teaching visit in early March 2020. Assuming there would be long lines at the airport due to mounting anxiety about the virus, I arrived extra early for my flight from Berlin Schoenefeld to Amsterdam Schiphol on March 4th. I couldn't have been more mistaken. Schoenefeld was virtually empty, a strange wasteland lit by fluorescent lamps mounted on white ceiling tiles. Schiphol wasn't as deserted as Schoenefeld. Still, a vague sense of discomfort permeated the airport, which was noticeably emptier than usual. I washed my hands, thoroughly.

If standing in close proximity to others was becoming a reason for uneasiness in places of high circulation, that feeling seemed to still be absent at the Sandberg. Teaching and giving a talk at the institute over the next few days, I was struck by the sense of community and proximity shared by staff and students alike. There was a familiarity in the way people worked together, shared a table at lunch, brought tea or coffee during class breaks. There were unexpected encounters, multilingual conversations in close proximity, people snacking on food from the same bowl, dancing together, sharing a drink. Small expressions of community that, right now, feel like privileges from a past world. A world that, most likely, will never be the same again.

Returning from this trip on March 7th – less than a week before the Sandberg made the decision to close its doors – the tension at Schiphol Airport had noticeably increased. With each passing moment the invisible threat of the virus drew closer; yet, it was impossible to predict the dramatic escalation that would occur in the days that followed. With the closing of the institute, many students were left adrift, untethered and uncertain about how to proceed.

Granted, the lived experience of uncertainty and anxiety has unfolded differently for everyone at the Sandberg. International students make up a significant part of the institute's enrollment. Of these, many come from outside the European Union. There is an enormous personal, financial and psychological investment implicated in moving to a new country. One has to learn new ways of being and thinking. For many, this also entails dealing with new manifestations of xenophobia, sexism and racism, specific to this new reality. Being away from one's family, friends and place of origin is difficult at the best of times. During a pandemic, this physical distance acquires an almost unbearable weight.

It is amongst these multiple tensions and uncertainties that, in the days following the announcement of the Sandberg's closure due to the pandemic, students felt the need to establish a closer dialogue with the institution. They made their demands known through an open letter, addressed to the Gerrit Rietveld Academie's executive board members, Annelies van Eenennaam, Jurgen Bey and Ben Zegers. In an interview for this essay, two Sandberg students described this gesture as a way to demand more transparency from the institute about the next steps to be taken in response to the pandemic. They felt that their voices, as students, were not being heard outside of the Sandberg, in the institute's negotiations with the Dutch government. In addition, due to the relative independence with which departments operate, there was uncertainty amongst the student body as to whom they should communicate their needs and concerns.

There were – and still are – many unanswered questions. With the physical space of the Sandberg inaccessible for the foreseeable future, what would teaching look like? Could the school offer its students some form of support in a time of extreme political, social and economic uncertainty? What mechanisms were in place to provide assistance to students left in a particularly vulnerable position due to their visa situations, financial conditions, housing or other factors? How could the institute use its power of negotiation with the Dutch government to advocate for better assistance for students – particularly those who come from outside of the European Union with less access to social support structures? What happens to the significant fees paid by students for a semester of teaching that will not, ultimately, happen in quite the same way?

All of these questions are key, not only to the near future of the Sandberg, but also to many other educational institutions. With second and third waves of

2 Zulfikar Abbany, 'Coronavirus: When will the second wave of infections hit?' in: *Deutsche Welle* 14 May, 2020. Accessed through: <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-when-will-the-second-wave-of-infections-hit/a-53435135> on 30 May, 2020.

infection predicted to appear in future,<sup>2</sup> the ways in which we approach learning, exchange and education will need to change. In an article recently published on *Al Jazeera*, historian of science and epidemics Dr. Edna Bonhomme remarks:

Pandemics do not materialise in isolation. They are part and parcel of capitalism and colonisation. [...] products of capitalism – from war to migration to mass production and increased travel – contribute massively to the proliferation of diseases. In the world that we live in, where capitalism and the remnants of colonialism fuel wars, unprecedented migration waves, public health crises and an increasing dependency on international and intercontinental travel, epidemics are inevitable. And, as the COVID-19 outbreak makes crystal clear, no countries, including the members of the Global North, are immune to these outbreaks.<sup>3</sup>

Teaching doesn't happen in a vacuum; education cannot be removed from the context in which it unfolds. Learning is a process of responding to the world. The closing of the Sandberg is a product and consequence of the broader structures that govern the ways in which we move through the world and relate to one another. Likewise, moving towards online teaching formats is, unfortunately, not a simple task. It requires a full revision of course content, as well as a significant readjustment in the expectations of both students and staff. This, obviously, is a difficult transition across all disciplines and approaches – and one that had to take place at a moment's notice.

The shift to online teaching means the loss of a certain spontaneity and the fluidity of in-class interactions and conversations. Speaking to a computer simply does not feel the same as speaking to others while sitting in the same room together, sharing the same space. In our interview, the students expressed that teaching at the Sandberg traditionally works in a very face-to-face manner – a dynamic that was brought into disarray by the pandemic. Online teaching requires a complete reshuffling of established structures, added to which, there are pressing questions pertaining to online privacy, considering the fraught political moment we are living through in most of the world.

3 Edna Bonhomme, 'What coronavirus has taught us about inequality' in: *Aljazeera*, 17 March 2020. Accessed through: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/coronavirus-taught-inequality-200316204401117.html> on 28 May, 2020.

There are, too, concerns about access. One cannot assume that all students own or can use adequate equipment to access a seemingly simple online teaching session. In an informal conversation, a professor at an architecture course in Germany told me that, at the beginning of lockdown, he created a poll for his students to assess their learning and working conditions at home. He was surprised to learn that a significant number of his students did not, in fact, have a computer of their own, and either relied on the institution's equipment in order to do their work, or sharing a computer with others in their household. Over the past several weeks, I've heard similar accounts from professors in a number of different institutions, fields and countries. My own students at the University of the Arts in Berlin have recounted similar stories. For students in fields where access to specific (and often expensive) equipment, materials and technical supervision is vital, this question becomes even more pressing. How is it possible, then, to continue one's education within this context?

Furthermore, regardless of discipline or interests, all students have to deal with a variety of issues relating to their living and working conditions, from lack of privacy at home, to the loss of access to libraries and quiet study rooms; a long list of hurdles, with no immediate solution in sight. How do processes of mutual learning amongst peers – part of the very foundation of education – take place within these new parameters? How do we work around the limitations of this new context and learn to circumvent its hurdles? How do we nurture caring and healing learning environments at a time when most people, both staff and students, suddenly find themselves under enormous pressure? How can an educational institution support its students in face of a massive, unforeseen event that is actively causing human suffering on a global scale, and for which there is no set end in sight? How do we hold space for the grief, fear and anxiety inherent to this situation?

For many students and staff, the COVID-19 crisis has also assumed deeply personal contours. In the past several weeks, we might have seen a parent or relative fall ill and felt the deep fear of loss compounded by the weight of distance. Some of us might have been directly affected by loss, touched by grief that acquires new dimensions through distance and isolation. A sneeze or a cough, things that ordinarily would not incite any particular worry, might have caused us to become suddenly, sharply aware of our breathing, of the rhythm of our bodies, wondering if we were infected, or had infected someone else. Some of us might have, indeed, become sick. Faced with sudden isolation, most

of us might have realised how deeply and fundamentally we rely on touch, on human connection and presence.

There are, additionally, a number of practical anxieties associated with the expectations and results of the educational process. For students set to graduate in the coming months, this means a profound uncertainty in relation to how final projects will be completed, as well as how and when the graduation exhibition and ceremony will take place. There is the anxiety of graduating in the context of an impending, deep economic depression, where positions in academia and in the market, as well as funding for arts and culture, are set to shrink significantly. For newly arrived students, the pandemic compounds the inherent difficulties of a change of environment and the subsequent process of adaptation. For all, there is a palpable frustration in not being able to enjoy the environment of the Sandberg – with all the spontaneous exchanges that it entails – as well as being suddenly separated from friends and peers that, typically, offer an important emotional support system.

There is, too, the – often internal – pressure that many feel to extract as much knowledge and experience as possible from a course in which they have invested significant amounts of time, effort and money. In our interview, the students remarked that the uncertainty and anxiety are particularly present due to the lack of a contingent plan of action by the Sandberg that would offer participants a way to make up for lost time when the crisis breaks. Enrolling at a higher education institution in the Netherlands isn't cheap – especially for non-EU citizens. There is, as of now, no option for pausing enrollment at the Sandberg until the pandemic is over. The general attitude seems to tend towards a form of asceticism, to weather the turbulence for as long as possible.

Indeed, the economic question is a pressing one. In our interview, the students expressed the feeling that the Sandberg's initial response to the crisis privileged EU citizens. Many students, particularly those for whom employment options are limited due to visa restrictions, rely on gig work, zero-hour contracts, unregistered job, and other 'informal' occupations to fund their studies. With the COVID-19 crisis, the source of income for many was wiped out in the matter of a day, and the emergency financial assistance offered by the Dutch government – a non-renewable €250 monthly fund, to be paid for a total of three months

– felt insufficient.<sup>4</sup> Non-EU citizens often don't have access to the full spectrum of local social support programmes.

<sup>4</sup> Later this was extended to May, June and July.

This, compounded by the fact that many of these students have less of a safety net due to distance from families and relatives or economic conditions in their home countries, amongst other factors, makes them particularly vulnerable. The tuition alone at the Sandberg amounts to €500 a month. Add to this the steep housing costs in the Amsterdam region, food, and other basic expenses, and the outlines of a genuinely alarming situation start to emerge. The two students with whom I spoke were careful to clarify that they did not know the financial situation of the institute, and that more transparency in relation to internal decision making in response to the crisis would have helped them feel more in touch with the process, and, most importantly, more qualified to make informed decisions about their future.

Yet, in spite of all these difficulties, I still noticed a deep sense of collectivity and camaraderie withing the Sandberg student body. Self-organisation, the students told me, has always been present in the dynamic of the institute – an affirmation that brought me back to the few days spent there in early May, observing students and staff bring snacks to share in class, set up a table with a small amplifier and drinks for an impromptu party. In his influential book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (originally published in 1968), educator Paulo Freire remarks that, very often, oppression becomes sedimented, imprinted into the mind of the oppressed. This, according to Freire, is part of the process through which the oppressed are stripped of their humanity and agency. The pedagogy of the oppressed, Freire states, is a humanist approach to learning which must be formed “with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity.”<sup>5</sup> Such a pedagogy “makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed,” fostering the political engagement that constitutes the necessary foundation for liberation.<sup>6</sup>

Freire warns us that emancipation and liberation cannot, <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

however, be bestowed by

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67. others; they must emerge as a result of *conscientização*,<sup>7</sup>

that is, the process of the oppressed gaining conscience about their humanity, even in face of adverse circumstances. He remarks:

not even the best-intentioned leadership can bestow independence as a gift. The liberation of the oppressed is a liberation of women and men, not things. Accordingly, while no one liberates himself by his own efforts alone, neither is he liberated by others.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

Starting from an understanding of pedagogy as a political endeavor, Freire reasons that in order to combat systemic and persistent inequality a radical shift in educational models is crucial. He thus proposes the educational project as an alternative to traditional education. Educational projects are problem-posing endeavors, in which people may cultivate “their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.”<sup>9</sup> Revolutionary education cannot subscribe to what he calls the “banking concept of education,” in which the educator deposits knowledge that the students subsequently collect.<sup>10</sup> Instead, the authoritarianism that constructs a hierarchy between student and teacher must be left behind, so that all involved parties become responsible for the educational process. Though navigating extraordinary circumstances, the impulse towards action and liberation, towards solidarity and collectivity demonstrated by Sandberg students remains present. It is this, more than anything else, that can carry the institute through this extended present, towards whatever the future brings.

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