

WE ARE THE
INSTITUTION:
FROM SHARED
PRECARITY
TO SHARED
RESPONSIBILITY

Catherine Somzé

“It’s not a question of being against the institution: We are the institution. It’s a question of what kind of institution we are, what kind of values we institutionalize, what forms of practice we reward, and what kinds of rewards we aspire to.”¹

¹ Andrea Fraser, ‘From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique’, in: *Artforum*, September 2005, Vol. 4, no. 1, p. 104.

The past year or so has been rough. The covid-19 pandemic raged, wildfires burned, and scandals erupted. Within the Dutch art context, stories of sexual abuse and harassment broke in the news, led by the Andeweg case, and then followed by the calling-out of other abusers, backlash, and bureaucratic procedures implemented by art academies.²

For a while, much-needed discussion intensified amongst students, teaching staff, and management about the intersection of education and racism, sexism, and other forms of institutional violence. Debates

around ‘cancel culture’ surged.³

³ For a distinction between call-out culture and cancel culture, see Alina Lupu, ‘Call-out Culture / Cancel Culture’, in *Platform BK*, 23 February 2021. Accessed through: <https://www.platformbk.nl/call-out-culture-cancel-culture-2/>.

Yet, as time goes by, many students still feel unheard, some teachers struggle with their role as public figures, and management remains anxious. Have we got closer to making art education in the Netherlands any safer?

Over the past year, independently of institutional initiatives, several labour unions, journalists, and other stakeholders (some of whom preferred to stay anonymous in fear of retribution) have published analyses of the roots of social unsafety at art academies. De Kunstenbond called for the Rietveld Academie/Sandberg Instituut to offer better terms of employment to their staff,⁴ and, in an interview for *NRC*, former ARTEZ board chairman Dingeman Kuilman urged art academies throughout the country to downscale student enrolment towards creating more room for person-

⁵ Arjen Ribbens and David Hielkema, ‘Studenten zeggen steeds vaker: zo ga je niet met mij om’, in: *NRC*, 21 April 2021. Accessed through: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2021/04/21/met-het-kunstonderwijs-is-iets-fundamenteel-mis-a4040683>.

alized education.⁵ The anonymous opinion piece ‘Het is niet je schuld – hoe kunstacademies onveiligheid laten voortbestaan’ further points at nepotism and a lack of institutional commitment to a systemic understanding of the problem as contributing factors.⁶

² Lucette ter Borg and Carola Houtekamer, ‘Hoe een kunstenaar carrière maakt onder aanhoudende beschuldigingen van aanranding en verkrachting’, in *NRC*, 30 October 2020. Accessed through: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2020/10/30/ho-e-een-kunste-naar-carriere-maakt-onder-aanhoudende-beschuldigingen-van-aanranding-en-verkrachting-a4018047>.

⁴ De Kunstenbond, ‘Kunstenbond stuurt Gerrit Rietveld Academie brandbrief arbeidscontracten’. Accessed through: <https://kunstenbond.nl/nieuws/kunstenbond-stuurt-gerrit-rietveld-academie-brandbrief-arbeidscontracten/>.

6 'Het is niet je schuld - hoe kunstacademies onveiligheid laten voortbestaan' (17 December 2020), anonymous trans. as: 'It's Not Your Fault - How Art Academies Perpetuate Social Unsafety', in: *Metropolis M*, 28 April 2021. Accessed through: https://www.metropolism.com/nl/opinion/42467_het_ligt_niet_aan_jou_hoe_academies_onveiligheid_laten voortbestaan.

7 Isabell Lorey, *Die Regierung der Prekären* (2012), trans. by Aileen Derieg as: *State of Insecurity: The Government of the Precarious*, London and New York: Verso Books, 2015, p. 49.

To dismiss the problem of social unsafety as a question of primarily individual psychology would be misleading. It is a complex issue that pervades all aspects of institutional life, from broad funding schemes to the nitty-gritty of assessment practices and from hiring procedures to the maintenance of individualist myths of self-creation and self-reliance. It is a symptom of what political theorist Isabell Lorey describes as 'governance through precarity' geared towards ever more economic productivity and efficiency.⁷ Building further upon Lorey's analysis, the fact that much of the personal struggling remains invisible to others in the same institution is far from strange. Governance

through precarity does not merely foster *but requires* mutual suspicion, instrumentalization and competition amongst peers as each one is struggling to make ends meet and to remain relevant in an organisational culture driven by the logic of the new. As psychoanalyst Linne Layton writes, "We have become so caught up in saving our own skins and soothing our own anxieties that we can no longer see how our fate is intertwined with the fate of others."⁸

A learning community is not a smooth nor a monolithic entity. It is a social field and, as such, it is not one of immanent togetherness. What defines it is a perpetual hegemonic struggle that flows from positions of precarity. To acknowledge this struggle means art educational institutions become self-critical; they become aware of what makes a learning community possible in the first place.⁹ In what follows, I will first zoom out to shed a light on mutual entanglements that constitute this struggle and shared

9 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985), London and New York: Verso Books, 2001.

precarity.¹⁰ Then, based on this systemic analysis, I will seek to formulate some ideas as to how to snap out of this vicious cycle and transform it into a virtuous one.

8 Linne Layton, 'What Divides the Subject? Psychoanalytic Reflections on Subjectivity, Subjection and Resistance', in *Subjectivity*, 2008, 22, p. 69.

10 The relevance of the analysis will slightly differ from institution to institution depending on their specific organization, management culture and overall vision on art and design.

FUNDING: STATE SPONSORING VS. BRANDING

Social unsafety can arguably be traced back to some unintended consequences of the economic scheme behind art academies' sustenance. The Dutch government funds public higher vocational education in the Netherlands based on the

number of students who enrol as well as those who graduate on a yearly basis, for up to four consecutive years for each student.¹¹

Given that art academies' income mostly depends on the number of students standing at the starting *and* the finishing line every year, it is of primary importance for them to prevent students from dropping out once enrolled or going too slow when studying. Schools need to keep the balance between student enrolment and degree delivery steady, if not growing. Next to this national financial scheme, the globalization of the educational market and the ongoing Bologna Process to streamline European education for compatibility of degrees have resulted in increasing competition at home and abroad for prospective students.¹² The Bologna

Process boosts students' mobility as much as it does degree interchangeability.

In combination with the Dutch financial scheme *per student capita*, this situation arguably constitutes a problematic incentive. Whether or not it is compounded with encouragement to find complementary income sources elsewhere, it implicitly encourages Dutch universities to profile themselves as businesses that work towards ensuring their future viability. In most cases, they will work on their 'brand' with lavish publicity and recruitment campaigns locally and abroad, despite calls to slow down and reverse the trend by decreasing student enrolment numbers.

Universities organised outreach programmes outside of the Netherlands,¹³ stimulated by evidence that foreign students, especially those coming from outside of the EU, contribute greatly to their wealth as well as that of the Dutch economy more generally, and this more so than Dutch students.¹⁴ In

many cases, art academies diversify their program 'offer' and seek to expand their degree issuing capacity to new realms – associate degrees, dual degrees, and third cycles.¹⁵ In tandem with employers increasingly demanding college degrees, art academies contribute

11 Although the specific yearly allowance per student depends on several factors and might as a result slightly differ, in 2020 the amount allocated by the Dutch government for each student enrolment was 6.908 euro. The same amount was transferred to the institution when a student graduated as a bonus. A quick calculation shows that the total amount granted by the State for a student who finished their study in the prescribed four years' time was 34.545 euro. Registration fees students themselves paid included, it was 44.840 euro. For more information see: Noëll Taravati, 'Waar haalt een hogeschool haar geld vandaan?', in: *NTaravati*, 10 August 2020. Accessed through: <https://ntaravati.nl/algemeen/2020/waar-haalt-een-hogeschool-haar-geld-vandaan/>.

12 Pavel Zgaga, 'Looking out! The Bologna Process in a Global Setting: On the "External Dimension" of the Bologna Process (Draft)', The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research Oslo, October 2006, p. 47.

13 Thomas Borst, 'Nederlandse universiteiten stoppen met Werven buitenlandse studenten', in *NRC*, 5 August 2021. Accessed through: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2021/08/06/nederlandse-universiteiten-stoppen-met-werven-buitenlandse-studenten-a4053896>.

14 Jonneke Bolhaar, Sonny Kuijper and André Nibbelink, 'Economische effecten van internationalisering in het hoger onderwijs en mbo', in: *Centraal Planbureau*, 5 September 2019. Accessed through: <https://www.cpb.nl/de-economische-effecten-van-internationalisering-het-hoger-onderwijs-en-mbo-0>.

15 In 2010, universities of applied sciences were granted opportunity to perform research resulting in the development of third cycle programs. Whereas positive in many regards, this development was paired with the obligation for those institutions to meet achievement goals regarding the percentage of teaching staff in possession of a Master or PhD degree. In 2020, it was the demand of the Dutch government to have 100% of their staff with a Master or PhD degree. In that manner the Netherlands follows in the footsteps of other European countries where these goals had been formulated much earlier. For more information see: Wilco te Winkel and Nico Juiſt, 'Strategie Hoger Onderwijs Nederland 2012', in: *Edugroepen*. Accessed through: https://www.edugroepen.nl/sites/SH0/Shared%20Documents/Strategie_HO_NL.pdf.

in this manner to the ongoing process of credential inflation, which in its turn heightens competition – and therefore precarity – on the labour market.¹⁶ This is a situation that both affects tutors and students who, at one point or another, will have to compete for the same scarce job opportunities.

16 'Credential inflation', in Kenton Bell (ed.), *Open Education Sociology Dictionary*, 2013. Accessed through: <https://sociologydictionary.org/credential-inflation/>.

ASSESSMENTS: STEREOTYPES COMPENSATE FOR A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE

The oil of this degree-delivery machinery is its assessment system – it is also where discrimination takes one of its most concrete shapes. Despite existing scholarship on the topic of 'the art of assessing art' today, many artists working in the educational field still seem to find the notion of 'art' and quality judgement based on 'objective criteria' antithetical.¹⁷ As Kuilman states in the above-mentioned interview: "The arts as a belief system is deeply rooted in academies. They are intelligent people; you can talk to them about anything except their religion. Then you get to be a part of them."¹⁸

17 Peter Hermans, Marjanne Knüppe-Hüsken and Diederik Schönau, 'Toetsen van creativiteit', in Henk J. M. van Berkel, Anneke E. Bax and Desirée Joosten-ten Brinke (eds.), *Toetsen in het hoger onderwijs* (2014), Bohn Stafleu van Loghum, 2017, pp. 295-305; Douglas G. Boughton, 'Assessment of Performance in the Visual Arts: What, How, and Why', in: Andrea Kárpáti and Emil Gaul (eds.), *From Child Art to Visual Culture of Youth: New Models and Tools for Assessment of Learning and Creation in Art Education*, Bristol, UK: Intellect Press, 2013, pp. 3-32.

18 Op. cit. note 5 (Ribbens and Hielkema).

Learning trajectories for art academy teaching staff to qualify as assessors and professional teachers exist in the Netherlands and are becoming compulsory ('BKO' and 'BKE'/'SKE' certificates). Yet, most art academies do not require acquiring those certificates unless a tutor is offered a steady position, and tutors themselves might find participation in those courses a burden on their already packed agenda. Refusal to comply when on a permanent contract might not lead to any concrete consequences either. As a result, formal education on the matter of assessing is generally lacking.

Given this lack of formal education, assessments might reflect personal beliefs regarding the quality of art and be poorly communicated to students. This is where the question of inclusivity comes into play. How ideological biases of

gender, class and race inform personal judgement is a well-studied phenomenon:¹⁹ Stereotypes compensate for a lack of knowledge.²⁰ In this manner, assessment procedures – and other aspects of the practice and organization of education – might reproduce discrimination and disadvantage marginalized groups.²¹

A complicating factor is that one of the legitimizing aspects of assessments in the arts is the presence of experts chosen for their ‘connection to the field’ rather than their proven pedagogical ability – the so-called ‘professor school’. In this context, the importance of a tutor’s high profile (their reputation and network) rather than their formal didactic education during hiring procedures becomes rational as it fits a gatekeeper’s model of assessment based on authority.

Taken all together – tutors’ personal ideas about what makes art great, a lack of proper education on the matter, and the belief that field expertise solely warrants assessment quality – these are the ingredients of an inflammable compound leading to moments during which a student might be ‘broken down and built up again’ to become part of the inner circle.²²

ORGANISATION: MANAGERIALISM VS. THE PROFESSOR SCHOOL

The above set of characteristics related to funding and assessment are reminiscent of institutionalized religion in which rituals give substance to otherwise intangible ideas. In the case of the art academy, specific ‘rites of passages’ contribute to the smooth circulation of students endowed with procedural legitimacy by paperwork and formal aspects of the assessment themselves. This system within art education is supported by the still prevalent romantic notion that creativity is inherent in personhood (above all children, adolescents, and young adults; less often at old age). According to this modern

19 Hele Gørrill, *Women Can't Paint: Gender, the Glass Ceiling and Values in Contemporary Art*, London etc.: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019.

20 Cecilia L. Ridgeway, ‘The emergence of status beliefs: From structural inequality to legitimizing ideology’, in: John T. Jost and Brenda Major (eds.), *The Psychology of Legitimacy: Emerging Perspectives on Ideology, Justice, and Intergroup Relations*, Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 257–277.

21 The Rietveld Academie / Sandberg Instituut recognized the issue by making diversity and inclusivity, with an emphasis on assessments, their priority number one in its 2019–2024 performance agreements with the Dutch government. For more information see: Gerrit Rietveld Academie, ‘Dossier Kwaliteitsafspraken 2019–2024’, in: *Gerrit Rietveld Academie*, 18 January 2019. Accessed through: https://rietveldacademie.nl/en/media/inline/2020/7/16/dossier_kwaliteitsafspraken_2.pdf. For a study of how discrimination plays a role during admissions, see Teana Boston-Mammah, ‘The Entrance Gap: A Study of Admissions Procedures at the Willem de Kooning Academy’, in Nana Adusei-Poku (ed.), *WdKa Makes a Difference*, Rotterdam: Willem de Kooning Academie, 2017. Accessed through: <http://wdkamakesadifference.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/TheEntranceGap-TeanaBoston-Mammah-WdKaMakesADifference-Reader2017.pdf>.

22 Bezemer & Schubad, ‘Royal Academy of Art, The Hague: Culture Survey Report’, *Koninklijke Academie van Beeldende Kunsten*. March 23, 2021. Accessed through: <https://www.kabk.nl/storage/documents/Culture-survey-report-KABK.pdf>.

understanding, the artist, rather than being considered an expert, is first and foremost understood as a special individual – traditionally a white man²³ – with close ties to what is often pictured in mainstream culture as an otherworldly reality.²⁴

23 Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*, Toronto: Women's Press, 1989.

24 Donald Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-garde Artist*, Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

At the typical 'professor school', which is premised on the idea that mere acquaintance with a high-profile artist conveys quality on a programme, students are

mentored by one or a few faculty members throughout their studies. Although debates surrounding the problematic consequences of this pedagogical model have centred on prominent examples in Germany and Switzerland, the stories shared on the Instagram account Call Out Dutch Art Institutions in the wake of the Andeweg case are evidence that it still very much persists in the Netherlands

compared to other countries where 'managerialism' is said to have replaced it.²⁵ Combined with the widespread belief that maintaining close, personal relationships with a student benefits education, institutions such as the Rietveld Academie/Sandberg Instituut that allow the perpetuation of this type of pedagogical organization might indirectly contribute to the creation

25 In the Nordic countries the 'professor school' has (seemingly) disappeared over the last decade. See Ane Hjort Guttu, 'The End of Art as We Know It', in: *Kunstkritikk: Nordic Art Review*, 22 April 2020. Accessed through: <https://kunstkriftikk.com/the-end-of-art-education-as-we-know-it/>.

of countless occasions for abuse.

The art school system increasingly shaped by the logic of accumulation indeed thrives on the paradoxical coexistence of the standardization of education *and* the cult of the individual. Individualism does not so much challenge uniformization, it enables it. High profile teaching staff give a 'face' to what would otherwise be a largely bureaucratic system geared towards ever greater levels of 'study success.' Individualism then reveals its purpose. It is the ideological backbone of conformity.

COMMODIFICATION: CONSUMERS & PRODUCTS

In this market-driven system that thrives on uniformity through the ideological workings of individualism, students become both the product *and* the consumer of education. As observed by Ivan Illich in his post-May 1968 now classic *Deschooling Society*, students in a culture where school is mandatory are trained to conceive of the world as a "pyramid of classified packages accessible only to those who carry the proper tags."²⁶ These students understandably expect

26 Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (1970), London & New York: Marion Boyars, 2018, p. 76.

the rewards projected in promotional brochures and fancy websites that sell them the idea that once paid for, higher education is an insurance ticket to a better future. In that regard, education becomes seen as the guarantee of a prospective social ascension that aspiring students might have come to associate with a career in the field of art and design.²⁷

27 Nathalie Heinich, *L'élite artiste: excellence et singularité en régime démocratique*, Paris: Gallimard, 2005.

Despite the way the State funds higher vocational education in the Netherlands, students pay a substantial amount of money from their own pocket to obtain their degree (this is especially true since the elimination of the so-called 'basisbeurs' in 2015). Although tuition fees at Dutch public institutions still constitute some of the lowest in the world, according to statistics, it costs a student about 50.000 euro from their own pocket to obtain a four-year degree in the Netherlands.²⁸ This amount becomes much higher when coming from outside of the EU. This higher financial investment comes on top of other difficulties more particularly faced by international students when relocating to the Netherlands such as finding accommodation. For many students, Dutch, EU and non-EU, to study at university has become a privilege that does not come without hefty loans or day jobs.

28 Minou van der Werf, Gea Schonewille and Robin Stooft, *Studentenonderzoek 2017: Achtergronden bij de Handreiking Student & Financiën*, Nibud/Nationaal Instituut voor Budgetvoorlichting, September 2017. Accessed through: <https://www.nibud.nl/beroepsmatig/nibud-studentenonderzoek-2017/>.

In the frame of this process of increasing commodification and stimulated by 'Uber-like' ratings and other means of performance quantification, education might then become considered by students themselves as a service for which one pays, and which one expects to be fully customized to one's own specific needs. This, in particular, has consequences in the art education field where the notion of expertise is difficult to extricate from personhood and is closely connected to the 'relationship to the field.' Again, the staff's advertised high public profile – certainly the case at Sandberg – might be a key reason for a student to join a school – more important than the staff's pedagogical abilities. In a globalized art educational marketplace, notoriety *is* the currency.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Is there a way out? How to snap out of this vicious cycle of precarity that the creeping commercialization of education has created and in which management, teachers and students alike find themselves equally trapped? Part of the issue

is the way individual actors uphold a toxic system that paradoxically keeps them wanting what holds them back. One of the thoughts that paralyzes people into non-action is that unless others start first with making a change, one might as well give up before even trying because it would be senseless and even disadvantageous to do otherwise.²⁹ This is why it's important for each and every person in an organization to take responsibility and work simultaneously on being the institution that they always wanted to be, an inclusive structure dedicated to mutual "care, commitment,

trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge."³⁰ In conjunction with recommendations made elsewhere, here are a few more ideas for it to take shape.

Let us invest in further professionalization of the teaching staff. Staff should be allowed to create a safer learning environment for students by including in their terms of steady employment participation to courses on inclusivity and pedagogy – and give them the means to do it by providing sufficient hours for it, even if it means less teaching for a while. As a reflection of democracy, the classroom is a place where debates take place and where positions are constantly being questioned and redrawn. In Micky ScottBey Jones' words, it is a 'brave space' rather than a 'safe space'.³¹ Pedagogical skills give tools to sustain rather than to erase those relations of conflict – to "create ways

within [one's] professional power constructively."³² It involves doing the emotional labour required when having to mediate discussions and to

refuse to use the institutional power conveyed upon one to coerce interlocutors to remain silent.³³ Formalization of performance assessments as well as hiring procedures will also support greater staff professionalization.

It is difficult if not impossible to get out of the vicious circle without the students also taking responsibility within this process. In that regard, open communication must be encouraged, but it is also important that information about protected forms of communication

29 This idea is based on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's tale of the stag hunter to be found in his *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755), trans. by Donald A. Cress as *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*, Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992, pp. 46-47.

30 This is the way bell hooks defines love in her book *All About Love: New Visions* (2000), New York: HarperCollins, 2018, p. 94.

32 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, New York and London: Routledge, 1994, p. 188.

31 Micky ScottBey Jones, *Invitation to Brave Space*, in: *Little Spaces of Hope: More Thoughts and Reflections from Amos Trust*, 2020. Accessed through: https://www.amostrust.org/media/3180/amos_trust_little_spaces_of_hope.pdf.

33 Ibid. In bell hooks' case – precisely those students who expressed views contrary to those of the minority groups who had attended her class in expectation of some form of retribution. It means to make sure everyone feels safe to speak regardless of one's own ideological affinities.

(e.g. existing official complaint procedures) is clear, and that actual complaints lead to follow-up actions. In other words, we must become active participants and citizens committed to the creation of organizations that reflect democratic values of dialogue, mutual respect, and solidarity: only then will art academies live up to their self-understanding as places where both creativity and criticality become institutionalized.

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From 2008 until 2011, Catherine was the chief art critic for Time Out Amsterdam. Her interviews, opinion pieces, and exhibition reviews also appeared in magazines such as ZOO Magazine and Flash Art. Since then, she has been lecturing on art and cinema, design, and critical theory at various Dutch higher education institutions such as Piet Zwart Institute and the Erasmus University College in Rotterdam. She is in possession of a SKE degree and serves as head of the assessment committee at the Willem de Kooning Academie, member of the examination board at the Sandberg Instituut, and thesis supervisor at the Dirty Art Department. As an educator, she believes her goal is to help students find their own voice as writers, makers, and researchers.

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

C R I T I Q U E

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