

# FEDERATION LEVITATION<sup>1</sup>

Annee Grøtte Viken

<sup>1</sup> "Federation Levitation A.K.A. FedLev is a multidisciplinary design team rooted in the community of the Rietveld art-academy and it's masters education, the Sandberg Institute. Fedlev, initiated and led by Paulien Bremmer, won the design competition for extension of the Rietveld + Sandberg institute. The building was delivered in 2019 with Bremmer ultimate responsible for the design from conception till delivery." Accessed through: <https://paulien-bremmer.org/fedlev>.

- 2 Definitions of 'federation' and 'levitation': <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/federation> and: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/levitation>.
- 3 Definition of 'levitation' according to the urban dictionary: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=levitate>.

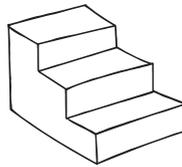
"A group of organizations, countries, regions etc. have joined together to form a larger organization or government with the goal of making someone rise or float, in the air without any physical support."<sup>2</sup>

"Levitating also means to smoke pot."<sup>3</sup>

Considering what Federation Levitation might mean when translated into space, I park my bike in front of the building posing under the abbreviation 'FedLev' named after the team that made it. Levitating, much in the same way that bricks do and spaceships don't,<sup>4</sup> I observe how the second floor, a white elongated volume, rests effortlessly on a frame of glass – like a Persian cat curiously dormant between the two adjacent buildings; one housing offices; the other artists. I am back at the Sandberg Instituut for the first time since they moved back to Frederik Roeskestraat and into the new FedLev building; the last addition to the shared grounds of the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and the Sandberg Instituut. Flicking through the architect's website, I couldn't tell if the featured image of the building was a render or a photograph. The building hovers between reality and its previous existence as an image with grace.<sup>5</sup> Maybe it's the overall white colour scheme. Maybe it is the sun.

- 4 "The ships hung in the sky in much the same way that bricks don't." Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, 1979.

- 5 See: <https://paulienbremmer.org/fedlev>.



## A DAY'S SAIL (WITHIN TOUCH)

'Interaction' and 'exchange' were the two most prominent keywords I stumbled across in the questions and answer section when reading up on the 'making-of' – of the new building. In their statement, the winning team, 'FedLev' wrote that, "The future of an art school is much more hybrid than the nowadays closed department based environment. Therefore, we want to develop a social and inspiring place where people can meet, develop their work, exchange ideas and give and get feedback. By re-positioning departments, adding a series of new

public and hybrid functions, and making the ground floor of the whole complex a multi-disciplinary and improved social space we want to turn the Rietveld/Sandberg into a contemporary art academy.”<sup>6</sup> The jury noted however that they “[...] felt that most teams failed to work through the connections between their architectural and pedagogic visions in sufficient depth. In their assumptions about the approach to education there appeared to be some conflict between their ideas

6 Statement FedLev, in: *Newspaper #4*, ('VOTE!'), 2012, p. 4. Accessed through: <http://newbuilding.rietveldacademie.nl/en/Information/Newspapers/Newspaper-4>. For more information on the DIY project (2011-2014), see these 'newspapers': <http://newbuilding.rietveldacademie.nl/en/Information/Newspapers>.

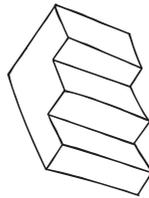
and the actual practice of the

Academy”<sup>7</sup>, going on to say

that “several of the proposals were based on the desire to do as much as possible collectively, while practical experience shows that each

department wants a place of its own.”<sup>8</sup>

8 Ibid.



#### UPON A ROCK (THE SIZE OF A TENNIS LAWN)

The first time I stepped onto these grounds was in 2012 to join the recently founded MA programme Studio for Immediate Spaces.<sup>9</sup>

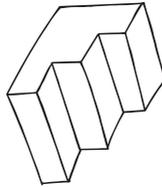
A new blank space just as confusing and stressful as it was invigorating and empowering; with a marker in one hand and a question in the other, we assembled the

first week with artist Krijn de Koning. One week and a workshop later, we faced a medium grey-blue, diagonally protruding wall, covering two-thirds of our studio space. It was a ten-centimetre-thick, about five metres long, two metres and ten centimetres high marvel made from slightly bent pine beams covered with almost flush veneer boards painted in this particular tint of blue. It still makes me laugh when I think about how that workshop escalated, and the collective astonishment afterwards of having constructed it. It was so utterly confronting and useless; making the studio far from easier to use, rather much more complicated and most of all incredibly annoying. I think Krijn had more fun than everyone else, baffled by the institute’s ingenious ‘architecture’ department.

9 Formerly known as the department of Interior Architecture, see: [www.immediatespaces.nl](http://www.immediatespaces.nl).

In his essay 'Inventing the Enemy' Umberto Eco writes; "Having an enemy is important not only to define our identity but also to provide us with an obstacle against which to measure our system of values and, in seeking to overcome it, to demonstrate our own worth. So, when there is no enemy, we have to invent one."<sup>10</sup> In retrospect, the wall seems as if it was the pure materialisation of our fears. None of us knew what we were supposed to be, we projected everything and could not agree on anything. We were just as alienated to the space as the wall ended up becoming; its physical presence rendered it real. The quest to define a collective identity culminated in an obstacle against which we could measure ourselves. After the fact, the wall became a source for an uncountable number of jokes and discussions as we were constantly confronted by it and faced with the on-going challenge of occupying the space around – in addition to being approached by people on a regular basis wanting to know why we had built such a thing. Serving poor explanations or none at all, we bonded over the inadequacy and failure with humour and anger (as the wall was an emotional safe-haven) in the quest for overcoming it up until its inevitable and final destruction about three months later.

<sup>10</sup> Umberto Eco, *Inventing The Enemy*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012, p. 2.



SO CRITICAL, (HER CHILDREN)

I sit down on a bench in the courtyard below the main entrance of the Gerrit Rietveld, a space that occurred with the new building, squinting against the sun I try to make out the words spelled out by a sequence of white papers stuck onto the window on the third floor of the Bethem Crowel building across the grounds overlooking the trash deposit, the ceramic workshop, the Rietveld pavilion and the Gerrit Rietveld. I stretch my neck and read; "...HAVE YOU BEEN", like a message from one giant to another. Benthem Crowel to Gerrit Rietveld.

In the introduction of the same essay, Umberto Eco shares an anecdote of a cab ride in New York City where upon exchanging facts about themselves, the driver goes on to ask Eco who the enemies of his country are. To this Eco

responds that they have none, only later to realise that wasn't true – that Italy's misfortune over the last sixty years was having no real, outside enemies, making them instead at constant war with each other.<sup>11</sup> Before the FedLev building, the courtyard I'm sitting in (one tree and a square of sand surrounded by concrete tiles) bordered on a large parking lot and somehow disappeared in the transition zone that the two together had become. The new building now has given it closure and created an intimate presence between the structures despite the fact that the staircase of the FedLev is facing its own façade rather than the courtyard. Perhaps just a retrospective plea as a sucker for staircases, but I think it would have done well as additional seating to the courtyard. Even if you don't have a key card and can't enter the door at the top of the stairs, in the spirit of Georges Perec; you could still enjoy a good staircase – and direct access to the rooftop.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

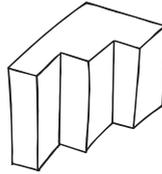
SOME MOON COUNTRY (UNINHABITED BY MEN)

In my second year at the Sandberg we had to participate in a workshop regarding the new building. Both students of the Rietveld and the Sandberg were to take part. There were talks and presentations, performances, flyers and newspapers. I remember one presentation in particular that ended up in a heated discussion on the subject of 'purpose', but that seemed to be rooted far deeper in a fear of letting go and giving up territory to one another than the question of purpose itself. I can still remember the friction that I felt between the two schools and the sentiments that were passed over to the students. There was a certain obligation to participate, and so people did, but how we could possibly formulate or produce anything of value regarding the project in two days was a mystery to me – especially as no one seemed to really know what we were responding to, or should respond to. During this period, the Sandberg was located almost in its entirety in the Benthem

Crouwel building. Most of us were in the understanding that we inhabited an office building, and not one that was designed to be an art school – a fact I was surprised to find out much later.<sup>12</sup> I never heard anyone question the story, nor make attempts to verify it, as it seemed incomprehensible to most of us. Our studio was located on the 7th floor and the exposed ceilings and bland, grey office aesthetic felt alien and far from neutral. However, somewhere within

<sup>12</sup> The Benthem Crouwel building was the second building constructed on the site in 2003 and is shared by the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and the Sandberg Instituut. <https://benthamcrouwel.com/projects/?cat=education#education-gerrit-rietveld-academie-amsterdam-1044>

that framework, it offered a much-appreciated freedom because you didn't really care about it. It came from the outside. It was ugly. It was the enemy.



## SOME SOFT MOUND OF (GREEN OR PINK)

Keeping in mind the office as a component of the future architecture of MA education, during an interview on the importance of space exploration, author and astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, said that the sole key for unleashing

curiosity reaching far beyond the cosmos is simply to give smart people freedom and space to do exactly what they want.<sup>13</sup> If freedom means “the condition or right of being able or allowed to do, say, think, etc. whatever you want to, without being controlled or limited,”<sup>14</sup> what does it mean to give someone space? Literally, if I

<sup>13</sup> “The greatest discoveries in the history of our species come about when smart people are given the latitude to think freely in whatever way suits their interest in cosmic knowledge.” Neil deGrasse Tyson in an interview with ‘Foreign Affairs’ (Neil deGrasse Tyson On Space Exploration) [09:55]. Accessed through: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoxWyIv-EGU>.

<sup>14</sup> Definition of ‘freedom’: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/freedom>.

ask someone to give me space it would usually mean “please leave me alone for an indefinite amount of time”. So, when does space become an enemy and when does it mean freedom? Especially if an enemy is ‘something that harms something else’ as in “familiarity is the enemy of desire”?<sup>15</sup> As other educational constraints are left behind, the Sandberg Instituut has the opportunity to offer both freedom and space, however abstract or concrete. FedLev is the last component of that fraction. A social hybrid nine years in the making.

<sup>15</sup> Definition of ‘enemy’: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/enemy>.

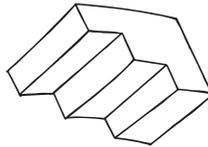
From my spot in the courtyard I observe the white braided metal casing of the building fold open, as a snake shedding its skin the sunscreens are pushed aside unravelling the interior façade. In the weeks and months after the building was finished, it kept popping up on my Instagram feed. Beautiful shots of clean, neatly organised spaces. Details intertwined in a white, eggshell, light grey colour scheme, beautiful handmade tiles,<sup>16</sup> wide concrete steps and poetic curtains in a pleasing symbiosis with slick metal and rainbow sheet material. The façade did well. There is something magical about that moment when a building belongs to no one. The

<sup>16</sup> The tiles are by alumna (Ceramics department) Caro de Jonge, see: <http://newbuilding.rietveldacademie.nl/en/The-New-Building/Design/Fedlevs-Design>.

moment in which it is so often portrayed: after it's finished and before it's inhabited, when it hovers in perfect buoyancy – a state that is perfect because it can never be permanent. Upon entering the studios after graduation-rush madness it is hard to tell from my feed where these well-defined, striking spaces are. The building is occupied, but seems alien to its newfound existence, as if bewildered

to what's next. The building has, perhaps in its newness, perhaps in form, an inherent wish to be kept clean, like a little architectural chapel. If Rietveld would whisper 'do not touch',<sup>17</sup> FedLev would echo 'be neat'.

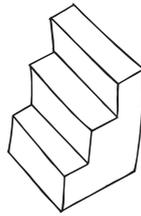
<sup>17</sup> The Rietveld building is a municipal monument, see: [https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lijst\\_van\\_gemeentelijke\\_monumenten\\_in\\_Amsterdam-Zuid](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lijst_van_gemeentelijke_monumenten_in_Amsterdam-Zuid).



LIKE A DESOLATE SEA-BIRD, (ALONE)

After a long haul of personality tests and other games, she had finally been admitted last year. Intertwined in the city fabric, you could attend on- or offline. It was perfect. Her character resembled herself in many ways except for the turquoise hue and some special algorithmic tattoos she had made after the webinar on fungus the first week. It was nice, this way she could chew on getting them done for real. Last week she had signed up for a few talks, but as usual been too busy catching everything Live so she made sure to tick off having it transcribed and dropped in her inbox as they finished. She tapped into her virtual studio – it was large, white walls, floor to ceiling windows and an open roof – and opted for the old-fashioned layout instead of the traditional desk space. She pressed the toolbox and had the wall tool come up. While playing with her space, a notification from 'catch' popped up. She had recently started a research on witchcraft and dropped a few relevant keywords into the interest-pool to see whom she could connect with. The turnout was great. The letters in the message played as if set on fire and ended as a charred stamp, she opened the chat. It turned out they were both fifty-fifty online and offline attendees, and as the two of them happened to be in town, they

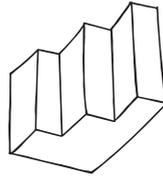
decided to meet up at one of the hubs in town instead of in the virtual one. The academy had spots all over the city. These would be subject to change, and at the moment they included a club, a lecture boat, two cafés, a fab-lab, an experimental farm kitchen, a 'neighbourhood' canteen, rotating exhibition spaces, and a few odd project spaces, storefronts, and monitor screens. She suggested heading to the academy's food generator – a farm and herb garden on the north side of town. In addition to the lab- and cultivation part they occupied several greenhouses perfect for an afternoon work session. These were always quite full so she made sure to sign up for a spot before logging out and heading for her bike.



#### LIKE THE LEATHERN (EYELID OF A LIZARD)

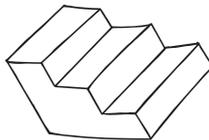
Having found someone with a key card willing to show me around I enter one of the permanent studios on the first floor. As I step inside, the gap between vision and use seems striking. It is, in addition to the entrance, equipped with two transparent garage doors on each short-end of the space, making the studio seem restlessly waiting for a multi-purpose, multi-flexible use, involving a lot of interaction and exchange. It looks as easy to inhabit as a double-door elevator. The garage doors were added later upon requests from each department wanting their own space. Balancing between a myriad of tables, trash, materials, chairs, closets and sculptures hiding fridges<sup>18</sup>, I can't help but wonder whether or not the future of MA education is an online one as the protected environment, the interactive white cube studios and the 1953 Eames *Hang it all* offices in the Benthem Crouwel building seem more comfortable as an image and a backdrop than a facilitator for actual making.

<sup>18</sup> "Other equipment related to food/drinks. For safety as well as insurance reasons, it is not permitted to use other appliances such as coffee makers, kettles, sandwich irons, microwave ovens, refrigerators etc. in the building. They will be removed. The inventory of the pantry remains there and cannot be taken elsewhere." Sandberg Houserules, 'DEF Summary Houserules February' 2019, PDF, p. 2.



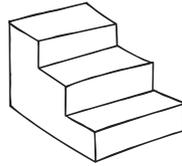
I get the impression that people with less material-based practices have adapted better to the new building than the ones with a more material-based one; guessing it takes less time to occupy a space when your studio weighs 1.25 kg and can be accessed anywhere and placed on any flat surface. But upon asking, some students tell me that even though they are mostly working on their laptops, they are not overly excited about their new space when comparing it to Overschiestraat 188 – the former temporary location of the Sandberg. They express a sincere loss of freedom and tell me that there are too many constraints in their new studio. Unimpressed by the newness, they shrug and state that there “were fruit flies in the old, and there are fruit flies in the new. Nothing much has changed”. Their style of occupation seems to resonate with their story. It looks as if they have been told to inhabit a Victorian bedroom, shuffled things around a bit but given up and fallen asleep with a half-eaten sandwich smeared into the crisp white sheets of a neatly made bed.

There is always a sentiment about what is lost, but I have been to Overschiestraat 188 and I can see why they would feel this way. The Overschiestraat was a warehouse adapted for the school but not made for it, and so it was free of assigned ‘visions’ and imposed rules. No one owned it and everyone had to adapt. But did it only work because it was temporary? Because everyone knew that it wouldn’t last? Or because no one cared? Or because teachers/staff and students were in it together, fighting the same enemy? Or were they enemies of each other in their intent towards its utility?



Entering another permanent realm one garage door further I come to the fine arts containers, each measuring three by four meters, 12m<sup>2</sup> times nine cubicles, shared between about fifteen students. It might sound like a generous offer but peaking inside they look cramped and feel unpleasant to work in, especially as the white lacquered container aesthetic dominate the spaces leaving very little

room for anything else. They give me a feeling of forced containment and an unresolved problem that led to a solution based on resistance rather than openness. It is the result of another retrospective plea, as the department wanted individual workspaces that meant cutting into its already assigned shared, open space. As a consequence, their shared space is now directly accessible by a total of fourteen doors and three garage doors. Shared workspace sounds nice, a hallway doubling as workspace could work, as a gathering place – why not. But when in truth it resembles more a heavy trafficked street, can we still pretend that these other spaces exist?



## TO SHED ALL (SUPERFLUITIES)<sup>19</sup>

I can't help but think that the building seems to have materialised multiple facets of the fear that seeped through the workshop I attended so long ago. The intense presence of the wood workshop in the building seems like a constant reminder of territory – howling from its glass cube; who is afraid of losing, and who is afraid of giving in. All the while MA education roots itself in the anther of a plant as pollen waiting for the wind. In a review of the art academy in Bergen,<sup>20</sup> the author, clearly obsessed with the design and intention of the world-premiered architects who'd penned it, seemed unable to process that the architects' 'vision' had been allowed to be altered by the means of temporary structures – by the people that actually *were* the future art academy. The library sips its coffee calmly, it assumed its expertise in the layout of libraries, and without further ado, engaged someone else to take care of its design.<sup>21</sup>

If flexibility is the future, how come it is so rigid? If transparency is key, how come it is locked up? If freedom is valued, how come it is predefined? As much as this essay has made an attempt to convey thoughts on the topic of the future architecture of MA education, I ask myself, have I really 'BEEN'? The German sociologist George Simmel wrote: "The

<sup>19</sup> All cursive headlines are extracted from: Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, Penguin Books, Hogarth Press, 1966, pp. 7, 11, 16, 21, 24, 40, 41, 51.

<sup>20</sup> The interior was designed by the British artist Nils Norman <https://rietveldacademie.nl/en/page/1210/library>.

<sup>21</sup> Pernille Akselsen 'Tåler en truck', in: *Arkitektur N*. (19 December 2017) pp. 58-67.

George Simmel, *Sociology*,  
Koninklijke Brill, 2009 (Original; Georg  
Simmel, *Soziologie*, Berlin: Duncker &  
Humblot, 1967)

boundary is not a spatial fact with sociological effects, but a sociological reality that is formed spatially".<sup>22</sup> In the end, MA education is pollen, people that catch the wind and meet over a horchata 9000 km later. Perhaps here architecture's shortcomings lay in facilitating too much, and its urge to insist is the grey-blue protruding wall, the needed enemy; the trigger for recognising beliefs that will spur occupation and change confines whether it is existing frameworks and their consequential exclusion and exclusivity, preformatted visions or architecture as knowledge capital. In the future, MA education should be less concerned with safekeeping architecture and more concerned with offering its smart people freedom and space to do exactly what they want. I exit the canteen, look up and read

"HOW HAVE YOU BEEN?"

Annee Grøtte Viken is a writer, researcher, artist and interior architect interested in the creation and understanding of space at large. She has published a book on the subject of 'spaces in fiction', done research on fiction and materials at the Jan van Eyck Academie with the collaborative practice Alberg Rosa, and is currently working on visual storytelling in relation to cultural identity and belonging thanks to Trøndelag Fylkeskommune, Norway. She teaches creative writing at the MA programme Corporeal at ArtEZ and holds an MA from Studio for Immediate Spaces at the Sandberg Instituut.

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