

Marijke Hoogenboom

Three scenes from the art academy:
the professional, the ignorant
and the local schools

www.polishtheatrejournal.com

Publisher:
Theatre Institute in Warsaw
Theatre Academy in Warsaw

Marijke Hoogenboom

Three scenes from the art academy: the professional, the ignorant and the local schools

Before I unfold the proposed three scenes of the art academy for you, I want to position myself and frame the perspective from which I speak: I am presently wearing a couple of hats, running the supra-faculty artist-in-residence program at the Amsterdam University of the Arts, a part of the Academy of Theatre and Dance, and chair of our DAS Graduate School, within which I am the head of DAS Research.

I started to work in art education twenty years ago, when Ritsaert ten Cate invited me to join him to invent the first – and up to now only – national institute for postgraduate education in the performing arts, known as DasArts. Ever since, I have had the opportunity to operate at the leading edge of new developments in the educational enterprise: in the mid 1990s, these were postgraduate and master programs, while ten years later they were in the field of artistic research, and now, more recently, in the context of the Graduate School. Mind you: these developments have not been initiated or even called for by artists, but were purely state-driven interventions – shifts in national and European policies, largely governed by the rules of the Bologna Process [standards for European higher education, begun in 1999]. However, I have experienced them as an opportunity in the Netherlands to question the status quo of our academies, and have found myself again and again in a situation where we could embrace them as a new field of experimentation.

So you could say that my position is dedicated, very privileged, but nevertheless concerned. Let's take this 'state of mind' as the starting point of my exploration.

I have been asked to speak about the model of DasArts, which I am happy to do anytime, anywhere. But for this occasion, to kick off your discussion, I don't want to limit myself to the origins of our institute. My proposal is to take you through three scenes of the art academy, or better: through the theatre school as I know her, or as I have learned to appreciate her over the past twenty years. Part one is taking the Academy of Theatre and Dance as a focus, the second part addresses the model of DasArts in its early years, and the last part is exploring present challenges and my view of an academy that still has to come into existence.

In all these examples, I am less interested in a singular program. I look rather at the relation between educational paradigms and institutional contexts: whatever we might come up with in the classroom, we can't escape that it is embedded in an (often invisible) apparatus that governs conditions for art education.

The impact of the institution is also crucial for me, because Europe is suffering multiple institutional crises in political and economic structures. Specifically, public institutions are under pressure due to massive budget cuts, privatisation and an increasingly centralised, bureaucratic system. Therefore my personal search in art education is constantly the search for an engaged re-appropriation of the institution, in order to rethink its functioning, position and decision-taking structures. Here we go.

The professional school

I assume that many of us in the coming two days [of this conference] will refer to the origins of the art academy, as it is still present in the field of visual arts, music, theatre and dance. Along with other institutions of the 18th century including the museum, the concert hall and the theatre, it is a product of the Enlightenment and an expression of consensus in the bourgeois public sphere.

Specifically for the performing arts, the establishment of a professional industry (that frames its activities not only as art, but also as labour) has ever since been indispensably connected with the foundation of academies; to put it more explicitly, on the one hand, theatre academies are still supposed to deliver professionals for certain institutional structures, while on the other, those structures define the norms, values and artistic canon of academies. Schooling and producing are part of the same system, happily affirming each other, and therefore focusing on specialized vocational training for existing professions in the labour market.

Also, my home base at the Academy of Theatre and Dance shares that same institutional history, founded in 1874 by representatives of the dominant powers of the field. It expanded over the years, specifically by swallowing other academies that came into existence in the late 1960s and fusing them into the largest theatre school in the Netherlands. Today, we take care of some six hundred students, two pre-colleges, fourteen bachelor programs in theatre, dance, education, production, engineering and scenography, and the Graduate School with three master programs, third-cycle research and further education. Our main building has about seventeen-thousand square metres in the centre of the city, with excellent facilities; our extra building for the Graduate School has another two-thousand five-hundred square metres. We are very proud that we educate all faculties of the theatre enterprise, and due to our resources also manage to 'simulate' – as we call it – a professional theatre environment, which means that students are educated in creative teams and can master all aspects of the entire production process, from studio to stage, together.

There are at least two serious ruptures in the legacy of this passionately professional school. The first one, of course, was a direct result of artistic innovations in the 1960s and 1970s that created major changes in the Dutch theatre system, and specifically destabilized the establishment of state-run repertory theatres. As a result, there was rapid growth for independent theatre and dance companies that became the main force on the artistic landscape and, consequently, also demanded access to education. The new avant-garde practitioners simply refused to accept existing schools and started to invent their own. Two of these belong to the heart of our academy and, over fifty years, have made their way

from the margins to the centre: the so-called Mime School, dedicated to small-scale, self authored physical theatre, and the School for New Dance Development, committed to a radical approach to dance and choreography. Both of these programmes were entirely created by artists and still have an impressive professional field on the independent scene that identifies with them.

Although the theatre school had previously been connected exclusively to large theatre and dance structures, all of a sudden it turned towards the most innovative field of emerging practices, and towards embracing new modes of education.

The core value of that shift is not only a set of critical pedagogies that emancipate the individual performing artist and advances the art form. It is also an act of liberating arts education from its instrumentalised function in the ecology of the enterprise, and freeing it from use for a specific market. Ever since, the Academy of Theatre and Dance has operated by a crucial paradox: engineering education to cultivate and pass on certain traditions, specialisms and skills, while at the same time challenging students and teachers to neglect and constantly reinvent them.

The second rupture in our academy is, unfortunately, not caused by a loud activist intervention from the artistic field, it has come to us in horrible silence and today reveals itself as a multifold and complex crisis that, again, we share with other public institutions. One part of it began with the introduction of the neoliberal agenda in the 1990s that suggested to the art school that it make the results of our work measurable, controllable and manageable, in order to evaluate the effective use of our resources. Within the European educational space, Bologna has translated that development for us into the threat of mass-produced, comparable competencies and modules.

Although we keep juggling them in Amsterdam with humour and imagination, numbers and art, and numbers and art education are not a very good match. They create a continuously expanding bureaucracy, and distrust the autonomy of the individual and drastically limit the space between students and teachers. Bureaucracy is a threat to an art academy, still one of the few spaces where we can operate an *exceptional educational model*, one based on practice in the studio, on slow learning, on subjectivities, informality and intimacy – all that sociologist Richard Sennett calls, in his analysis of the workshop, ‘the ethics of craftsmanship’.

The other part of our crisis is for me even more relevant. That crisis is not produced by the academy or by demands of politicians and bureaucrats, but instead by massive social, political and economic changes that lead to the dramatic breakdown of consensus in the bourgeois public sphere, and ultimately contests the structures necessary for art to be supported, distributed and consumed. This breakdown is not only produced by way of budget cuts – as happened in the Netherlands three years ago – but primarily by a conservative, populist climate that frames arts, culture and progressive education as a threat to society, and answers global challenges of poverty, war, mass migration and climate change with xenophobic and antidemocratic claims.

I am afraid that as a public institution, the academy – just like the theatre, the concert hall and the museum – must respond to these changes in the outside world. It is in this responsiveness that we need to question

‘why we exist’, and begin to understand where the academy could go, or what it needs to learn from.

The ignorant school

The obvious – and kind of confrontational – contradiction in my professional life is, of course, that the way we set up DasArts was the exact opposite to my plea for the self-reflexivity and social responsibility of the art school. Even more so, because we have to situate DasArts within the problematic educational space of the 1990s.

I can’t deny that we were starting an academy in 1994 as a ‘no-manifesto’, if I may borrow this term from the American choreographer Yvonne Rainer. Today, I am happy to frame this choice as a provocation, or even as a curious accident. Imagine: we were commissioned by the ministry of education to invent a national postgraduate institute for performing arts; but as nobody at that point knew what that could mean, we met a rather utopian moment and made the authorities accept that they had no idea what they would get: no to permanent teachers, no to disciplines, no to regular classes, no to a fixed curriculum, no to repetition, no to decent evaluation, no to existing pedagogies, and no to theatre as we know it.

The journey we embarked on was guided instead by the intuitive ground plan that Ritsaert had sketched on a rainy afternoon in some dark Amsterdam cafe on two sheets of paper that I stuck together so we could hang them on the wall and look at them as our road map, our handmade score for imagining a school. A school that was operating as an ever-transforming, ever-moving organism, one that went hand in hand with the absence of structure, continuity, criteria and rules.

In those pioneering years, DasArts had no desire to reflect its mission and pedagogy in a broader historical or theoretical context, and has never examined those qualities we shared with other alternative academies: the ambition to flatten hierarchies, for example, and the idea that artists should not be viewed as specialists and not isolate themselves from everyday life. Our arrogance and our decision to *remain ignorant* was our most important driving force. And like the American artist Mary Emma Harris, who recalls the opening of the legendary Black Mountain College, we were convinced: “We were there and that was enough.”

It is no secret that our director – who originally was an artist and producer – did not enter education because he was interested in teaching and learning per se, but because he was excited by the uncertainty of the game, and having run his influential Mickery Theatre for twenty-five years, he was rigorously committed to the development of new theatre practices. Intuitively, Ritsaert kept a distance from the notion that art schools should represent the status quo of existing forms and norms or engage with them and provide answers about what art is. In his view, the academy as an institution is inherently conservative; it is the backdrop against which society makes visible the limitations of its concept of art. And if our view of the arts is limited, then so too is our view of society. Ritsaert realised early on that the academy is where it all begins. It is here that things get off the ground and where change, social as well as artistic, has to be embedded if we believe change can be initiated from within the system at all:

My personal attitude is one of critical eagerness. I want someone to show me something that, however rough it may be, will catch me off guard. I want my curiosity stimulated and excited by something, however unready it may be, that smells good. I want something I don't know yet, and I certainly don't expect to know ahead of time what any of this might be. Does active interest stimulate a student? I hope so; that's what I have to offer. I, personally, know of no other way to create a climate for an artist to grow in.

More than by any policy plan, the DasArts narrative was most perfectly expressed by very tangible presences. For example, a tiny drawing by the Swiss artist Markus Raetz that became our first logo: a figure at the top of a ladder, calmly juggling the rungs he has just climbed. This drawing seems to tell the whole story at once. Not just its impossibility, but also the pleasure, the danger, the inventiveness and the plain beauty of juggling with your skills and talents without knowing exactly where you are heading. The tangibility and visibility of a material environment was conditional. Long before we had our first students, we had created a home for DasArts that gave all involved a strong sense of belonging and allowed for a hospitality that is still such an essential component in our culture. Two deserted buildings on an industrial site on the outskirts of Amsterdam were turned into flexible workspaces, a mobile kitchen and a growing library filled with objects, artworks, fairly advanced technology and furniture gathered from thrift shops, Ikea and friends.

Our principles were simple: there was a small, dedicated staff and a restless mechanism that obliged the school to continually redefine its entire studies programme. Twice a year, one or two international artists would be invited to take over and curate a ten-week 'Block' from scratch. Each Block was a unique educational experiment in itself: each was theme-related, each was closely linked to specific questions, networks and practices, and each was dedicated to exploring the potential of contemporary performing arts. These Blocks took students and staff to the very heart of theatre and dance, to the edge of the discipline, beyond cultural borders, into politics, new spiritualities and city life and far beyond the safe haven of Amsterdam. 'We built using everything we found, with the passionate need to get it right for the people who came to us'.

What was probably most striking about our approach to education was its sacrifice of stability, and the joy that was taken in exploring contradictions: on one hand, huge emphasis was placed on the artistic development of the individual participant, while on the other, students were confronted with a vast number of joint activities that they did not elect to participate in. Similarly, while we were known for our visionary leadership, we nonetheless chose to pass responsibility of each Block on to a new, invited curator.

We were never tempted to repeat Blocks or even compare one to another. Although components such as field trips, workshops, lectures, reading material and presentations reappeared in various forms, one could perhaps best define each Block as a pedagogical laboratory where students and curators alike often felt breathless and overwhelmed at the sheer amount and variety of events they experienced. Gabriel Smeets, director of the Cullberg Ballet and mentor of the Block 'The Political Body', confirms: 'Yes, the pressure was high. The tensions were explosive

and, yes, we were dealing with principles of what the Slovenian scholar Bojana Kunst would describe as the basics of a creation process: resistance, desire and necessity⁷.

The challenging and inventive nature of those who contributed to DasArts' studies programme produced a form of theatre education that was as likely to take place in a studio, in a kitchen, on a boat, on the street, in a nightclub, in the countryside, or on the sands of Senegal as it was on a stage. The choice of such a fluid education model reflected our primary assumption: no single individual and no single specialisation is able to fully master today's complex reality, and emerging performing artists should be open to learning from anything they encounter – all the time. Ultimately, it was the students who had to determine what form of training they needed, not a presiding authority. It was they who had to decide what was useful to them and in what ways they could make connections: between one artist and another, between theatre and society, and between theory and practice.

The dominant use of the Blocks should not distract from the fact that DasArts always had a clear focus of embedding each individual participant into ongoing exchange with the artistic staff and personal advisors, who facilitated feedback and supported students in drawing conclusions that would enable them to continue their own course of study. DasArts conceived that process as a combination of personal responsibility and institutional challenge, of individual freedom and mutual trust. 'It has to do with training the sentiments – creating an awareness, different attitudes and approaches which will provide some space for vital discoveries. It's the way you answer "why this?", "why here?", "why now?" and "for whom?". And then of course, present it'.

Because the programme was so intense and the community so demanding, we preferred to select students who had already acquired some professional experience, who had an idea about their position in the world and their long-term prospects. Many already had their own companies or were connected to production venues and professional workplaces. Over the years, DasArts had attracted participants from all walks of arts and from all over the world. Our students were never identifiable by a particular style or interest and we never intended to exclusively support performance makers. Nurturing specific talents led often to a change in the direction students took: from director to producer; from performer to director; from choreographer to filmmaker; from director to teacher; from scenographer to visual artist; from dramaturge to performance maker – or to administrator, or to farmer.

If our educational aim was 'not to fit in the field as it is', or to fill in existing roles, this does not mean we encouraged students to withdraw from the arts – on the contrary. We challenged them to re-consider their positions by relating to what is there already and creating more contexts where they can create and share their work.

When I left DasArts shortly after Ritsaert, in 2001, I counted eighty-two students, fifty-one Block mentors, and two hundred and six guest teachers. And I was very, very tired. Our stubborn refusal to learn had created an ever-expanding mechanism and a celebrated redefinition of the programme and the incomparability of the individual experience as a norm. We knew that, in order to advance our core principles,

we had to remove ourselves from the system and hand the school over to other directors, who would develop a more profound understanding how a radical position in art education might be transformed into the next phase: a less ignorant, more responsible and sustainable educational environment. Especially DasArts' present director, Barbara van Lindt, has continued remarkably to develop the school's mission and pedagogy as an outstanding master programme. I am lucky again that Barbara is also an inspiring partner in the ambition to build, from the legacy of DasArts, the DAS Graduate School, which last year became our new centre for all master education, third-cycle and research at the Amsterdam Academy of Theatre and Dance.

The local school

So let's look at my last scene, not the professional or the ignorant school but a recent invention of ours: the local school.

One of the many things I take from DasArts is the power of what the political philosopher Daniel Blanga-Gubbay calls the fictional institution. Blanga-Gubbay states that we have started to act in relation to historically developed institutions as if they were phenomena of nature, beyond our control. Acknowledging the many imaginary institutions that artists have created, he is not so much interested in challenging the institution from the outside, but from the inside: in pushing the institution forward to be freed of the idea of a fixed identity, towards a flexible one through fiction. During my active years at DasArts, it never occurred to me to apply the concept of fiction to Ritsaert's deliberate desire to constantly propose to 'act as if' our school would be something else than it had just been. And yet this is the main heritage I would like to re-consider from DasArts today: institutional structures are fiction, they are constructed by people and therefore can be deconstructed, and ultimately they are provoking us to rethink them otherwise. However, and this is the main question that triggered us to propose the Local School: for which purpose? What kind of identity do we envision for a public institution like the art academy?

The most popular slogan we used at DasArts – the early mission statement, so to speak – goes like this: 'We cannot know what theatre must or will be tomorrow. Participants in our post-academic studies programme have to show us what the future will be'.

Two things bother me today: wasn't it too easy to pass on the responsibility for the future on to our students, and keep ourselves, with our institutional commodities, away from that frontline? And how could we pretend in the mid 1990s that we had no sense of the future, as the geopolitical shifts after 1989 started to manifest themselves right in front of us?

The fact is that, twenty years later, we find ourselves in an even more explosive situation. Within the international – and intercultural – community of the DAS Graduate School, it is very obvious that neither as artists nor as citizens can we hide behind the walls of Europe, or behind the walls of our beautiful institute. Students from the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Poland, Ireland, Romania, South Africa, Kenya, Iraq, Lebanon, Brazil, Korea, Argentina and the United States of America confront us with issues of inequality and social justice, and with their struggles against hegemonic powers in other places in the world. Don't worry, I am

not trying to sell political activism to you, but I would like to express the serious concerns we have in Amsterdam about how to position ourselves within the city, and in relation to our connectedness with the global context that is present through our students.

And here is the most direct example you could think of: last year, the DAS Graduate School moved into a new building, a unique place with a rich and highly charged history, along the exciting, until-now forgotten north bank of Amsterdam's IJ waterway. For a hundred years, our site served as the laboratory of Royal Shell Industries, which, in our building, conducted their research into the profitable exploitation of fossil fuels, mostly in developing countries. The close-up of our space is pretty overwhelming, and we are privileged to approach art education again from thinking of it through all aspects of our operational base. But if you zoom out (or simply look out of the window or take a walk), you will meet another challenge of our location: the city's formerly isolated northern borough features in the national top-twenty list of impoverished areas, and is undergoing a dramatic process of redevelopment. The area is now seen as the most attractive location for expanding and easing the pressure of the city centre, and maintaining tourism and creative industry as an economic growth factor. As in other urban areas under development, artists and creatives like us are playing a crucial role in maintaining liveability, but are also contributing to the violent process of gentrification.

All of a sudden, it seems impossible to ignore what we have become part of, and we feel very strongly that as an institution dedicated to innovation and development we need to respond, and we can't afford to only perform the city on behalf of our own subjective positions, while the financial regimes move on without us. Having said that, the idea of the Local School is not conceived as another studies programme, or another enterprise: we use the Local School as a tool to challenge the academy on how we might re-locate ourselves in our direct environment.

There is nothing spectacular about the Local School, but it expands our identity into the ecology of the city, and leads to a slightly different attitude and to a couple of important changes already: for example, how we respect and make use of the local economies, how we acknowledge that we have responsibility in confronting the process of gentrification, how we learn to share resources with initiatives in the neighbourhood, and how we try to be available for other artists in the field who have developed practices around place, participation, community and public space.

None of the activities of the Local School are part of our curricula, or an obligation for students. The Local School is an organising principle, a commitment we have as an institution, and a choice of joining our students to embrace the possibility of fiction – of thinking of things otherwise – in order to shape the future.

ABSTRACT

Marijke Hoogenboom

Three scenes from the art academy: the professional, the ignorant and the local schools

The Netherlands is renowned for its adaptability to new developments and trends – in cultural policy as much as in education. Specifically in arts education, important experimental developments from the 1960s onwards opened up the academy and were the driving force behind unique programmes based in Amsterdam, such as the Mime School, the School for New Dance Development and DasArts. The innovative performing-arts field in the Netherlands still owes its quality and vitality to these schools and to the exchange they enable between education and contemporary art practice. This article explores three different approaches to art education, and speculates how it can act as a form of institutional critique, questioning the institution of the art academy as such and challenge its relation to the world.