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BUILDING WITH BLOCKS

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DasArts, the internationally renowned experimental performing arts school in Amsterdam, was established in 1994, in a period when it was still possible in the Netherlands to obtain combined funding from arts and educational bodies for such a forward-looking learning environment, outside the BA-MA structure. After lengthy negotiations about the desired form and scope of this 'international multidisciplinary centre of excellence', it was the former director of Amsterdam's legendary Micky theatre Ritsaert ten Cate, who eagerly took on the task of establishing and then directing the school.

Ritsaert ten Cate, who died in 2008, was a man of vision. It was a vision that has defined DasArts' unorthodox approach throughout its history, even after his departure from the school in 2000. I was lucky enough to be a close associate of Ten Cate's as part of DasArts' original team of artistic directors. And now, in 2009, when there is less room for such an idiosyncratic form of education – outside formal structures – I am involved in bringing DasArts into the educational fold as a Master of Theatre programme, in my role as professor at the Amsterdam School of the Arts and as member of the newly established advisory board to the current DasArts director Barbara Van Lindt.

Back in 1992, all the relevant main players in the Dutch theatre and educational world were involved in debating and defining the key components of the school that was to become DasArts. All manner of boards and specialists had their say through reports, applications and symposia. After seemingly endless negotiations, Ritsaert ten Cate at last called a halt to all the to-ing and fro-ing and was given permission to act.

It has been speculated that some involved at the time thought the various funding bodies were overreaching themselves in their combined ambitions for this centre of excellence, the Netherlands' first postgraduate training programme for performing arts. Perhaps these people thought the selection of the fearless pioneer and passionate entrepreneur Ritsaert ten Cate was bound to result in an utopian proposal that would be impossible to implement –

inevitably leading to the collapse of the whole project.¹ If these rumours are true, these doubters must have been sorely disappointed, because DasArts was entrusted with the privilege of creating from scratch a postgraduate training programme and of operating independently, under the supervision of its own board and on its own premises. DasArts was always a nominal part of an institutional framework, but managed to ignore and neglect its ties. It was an autonomous structure beyond the arts and education establishment. So let us examine DasArts' continued claim to a place in art education.²

Points of departure

The Netherlands is renowned for its adaptability to developments and trends – in cultural politics as much as in education. As a nation, we are more willing than most to adjust traditions (or even simply dispense with them) if the times are seen to require something new – new features, new structures or new funds. Specifically in art education, the classical concept of the art academy, with its authoritarian master-student relationship, has been abandoned and replaced with an objectified system of schooling characterised by transferable curricula and shared assessment criteria. In discarding this all-pervasive *Meisterschule* approach to art education, the academy was opened up, allowing for a multiplicity of forms of study that nonetheless co-exist within a well-defined frame of reference. In the performing arts, for example, important experimental developments that took place in the Netherlands in the 1960s, such as the emergence of physical movement theatre and conceptual dance, have made great inroads into education in the country. They are the driving forces behind unique study programmes such as the School for New Dance Development and the Mime School (both of which are BA courses at the Amsterdam School of the Arts). The innovative and independent 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.³

DasArts, however, was not initiated, or even called for, by artists themselves. It was the result of a purely state-driven intervention arising from the kind of policy change that frequently presses for the renewal (or at least for the re-evaluation and repositioning) of existing modes. In the early 1990s, just before the Bologna Process left its mark in higher education, the Netherlands witnessed a brief period when the demand for the

¹ Amsterdam School of the Arts, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Dutch Council for Culture.

² DasArts, The Amsterdam School for Advanced Research in Theatre and Dance Studies was officially founded in 1994. It was funded until 2008 by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry for Culture.

³ Both programmes are part of the curriculum of the Theatre Faculty at the Amsterdam School of the Arts: www.theaterschool.nl

homogenization of educational structures had not yet been institutionalized.⁴ In preparation for Bologna (or perhaps simply out of a sense of indecision) the Dutch government displayed a willingness to support a limited number of postgraduate institutes that were to develop autonomous educational practices over the long term – outside the influence of new rules and regulations and of fashionable European policies.⁵ Among many other things, DasArts' journey is an exemplary model for those interested in the productive exploitation of a contested situation and in resistance to operating in response to, or anticipation of, trends.

Without

In her illuminating book *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, the scholar Mary Emma Harris recalls the opening in 1933 of the progressive American art school of the book's title. This had been achieved without a formal programme, without any general statement of the college's aims and ideas and without preconceived notions. There was, however, a strong sense of community: "We were there and that was enough."⁶

It is no secret that DasArts' first director, Ritsaert ten Cate, entered education not because he was interested in teaching and learning per se, but because he was excited by the uncertainty inherent to the situation being offered to him. Furthermore, having run his influential Mickery theatre for 25 years, he was still rigorously committed to the development of new theatre practices.⁷ Intuitively, Ten Cate took 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 art school' 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. Ten Cate 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 – and if change is to come about at all.

Charles Esche, curator and former director of the Proto Academy, sees the potential role of the academy in contributing to the power of art to inspire: "The currency of art is imagination,

⁴ The Bologna Process is intended to lead to the establishment of a European Higher Education Area in 2010, which should, in accordance with the Lisbon Strategy, contribute to the establishment of the European Union as the world's largest knowledge economy. The Bologna Process was launched along with the Bologna Declaration on 19 June 1999, in which the 29 participating countries committed themselves (but were not formally obliged) to adopt a harmonised system of easily readable and comparable degrees, essentially based on two main cycles (BA and MA) that would enhance the mobility of teachers and students.

⁵ Besides DasArts, several other second-phase institutes were founded during the same period. They include the Sandberg Institute for visual arts and design at the Rietveld Academy and the Binger Filmlab, which was part of the Amsterdam School of the Arts until 2009. Websites: www.sandberg.nl, www.binger.nl

⁶ Harris, M.E., *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, Cambridge/London: The MIT Press, 2002, p. 2.

⁷ From 1965 to 1991 Ten Cate's Mickery Theatre was an influential centre, both nationally and internationally, for the development of new theatre practices. The Mickery created its own groundbreaking performances and hosted pioneering directors and companies from the US, Europe, Japan and elsewhere. Many visitors would become leading voices in the field and the Mickery itself became renowned as a crucial site of innovation.

and imagination is about imagining into existence that which is not in existence – to imagine things otherwise.”⁸ For Ten Cate, it was self-evident that this new school should explicitly choose not to focus on the standardization and transferability of knowledge, but rather on the right to imagine and the need *not* to know – whether about established courses and methods or about projected aims and outcomes.

In retrospect, one might interpret Ten Cate’s strategy as a clever ploy to escape the ongoing debate and to write the rules of a new game. But in fact he was driven by a very personal urge as a creative artist not to repeat himself or to draw on his reservoir of experiences.

“What I really wanted,” he said, “was to not know what it was about and to find it out experimentally, step by step; ‘staging’ the whole process, the whole development, *its* world and *the* world – the world in which it would have to exist.”⁹ Ten Cate was aware that his determined ignorance (as a director and a teacher) would expose DasArts to risk and surprise, and that he had to find firm ground on which to build the school – literally, it turned out, as well as figuratively.

More than by any policy plan or strategy, the DasArts narrative was most perfectly expressed by very tangible presences introduced into the school by Ten Cate. The first was a pair of immense late-1920s’ standing candelabras that, on first sight, might have seemed better suited to a church than a school, but which clearly communicated festivity, tradition and craftsmanship (“There’s no need to discuss those qualities, now that the candelabras are here”, explained Ten Cate); the second was a tiny drawing by the Swiss artist Markus Raetz. This was the first DasArts logo, a figure at the top of a ladder, calmly juggling the rungs he has just climbed. “This drawing seemed to me 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.”¹⁰ The mission of the school had become embodied in these icons, and it was obvious that the only way in which DasArts could now move forward was through practice. As early as 1993 – before DasArts had formulated a policy and a study programme and before participants had started joining – Ten Cate and his staff had created a home for DasArts that gave all involved the strong sense of belonging and generous hospitality that was always such an essential component in the school’s culture. Two deserted buildings on the Westergasfabriek, a red-brick industrial site on the outskirts of central Amsterdam, were turned into flexible workspaces, a mobile kitchen and a growing library filled with objects, furniture, art works and fairly advanced technology gathered from antiques shops, thrift shops, Ikea and artist

⁸ Esche, C., *How to Grow Possibility: The Potential Roles of Academies*, Amsterdam: Research Group Art Practice and Development, 2007, p. 1. Proto Academy was a pedagogical experiment from 1998-2001 initiated as a research project by Charles Esche at the Edinburgh College of Art.

⁹ Ten Cate, R., ‘Letter to Dragan Klaić’, *DasArts Dialogues 1*, Amsterdam, 1993.

¹⁰ Ten Cate, R., ‘A Series of Models’ (1993), in *DasArts*, Amsterdam, 2000, p. 32.

friends.¹¹ But even as it was creating a bricks-and-mortar location for its staff, students and teachers, conceptually, DasArts was rigorous in its expansion of the possibilities within theatre and education. There were no fixed curricula, no permanent teachers and no regular classes. Instead 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 curators would be invited to take over and develop from scratch a ten-week 'Block'. 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 at DasArts 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.¹² The school operated as a living organism, responding to the action and the people packed into it. "We built using everything we found and learned, and with the passionate need to get it right for the people who were coming to us."¹³

Cornerstones

In his speech as the honorary Chair at the DasArts graduation ceremony in 1999, American theatre director Peter Sellars encapsulated the school's learning structure as 'project-based', 'improvisational' and 'collective'. He had just seen the third generation of participants concluding their studies and reporting on their journey through DasArts. By then, DasArts had tested and established its basic principles and these continued to be adhered to by the directors that succeeded Ten Cate: the Surinamese actress and educator Alida Neslo in 2000; and the Dutch "mezzo-soprano, writer, improviser, chansonnière, director, etcetera" Moniek Toebosch in 2004.¹⁴ The original architecture was sufficiently open for them to create their own interpretation of DasArts, and neither of them dramatically altered the way the school operated.

What was probably most striking about the approach to education at DasArts was its sacrifice of stability and the joy that was taken in exploring contradictions: on the 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 the school is known for the visionary artistic leaders on its staff, it nonetheless chose to cede authorship of each individual Block to a new, invited

¹¹ Later, DasArts expanded to another two buildings, a couple of garages, a second-hand greenhouse, a self-made pond and a 30-metre long wooden bridge (the result of a workshop with the Japanese artist Tadashi Kawamata). In 2003 DasArts moved from the Westergasfabriek to its present location, a historic school building in Oosterpark.

¹² All Blocks, Contextuals and individual routes taken by of students are extensively documented on DasArts' website: www.dasarts.nl

¹³ Ten Cate, R., 'Once More with Feeling', in Brand, J., Ten Cate, R., Colenbrander, A., De Muijnck, C. (eds.), *The Art Academy of the 21st Century*, Groningen: Profiel AMP 13, 1999, p. 247.

¹⁴ Ter Borg, L., 'Ik wil zuiver blijven, geen rafelranden', interview with Moniek Toebosch, NRC Handelsblad, 6 June 2009

curator. As of this writing there have been an astonishing total of 29 entirely distinct Blocks. New DasArts director and former advisor to the school Barbara Van Lindt recalls, “The fact that DasArts was prepared to apply methods and inspiration from any discipline was very unusual at [the] time. It’s still not widely acknowledged in the Netherlands that DasArts was a pioneer in the way it confronted artists with realities outside the arts world. This emancipation of artists, enabling them to engage with social situations and to collaborate with communities was particularly important in the 1990s.”¹⁵

Almost any two Blocks from the history of DasArts would have been suitable candidates for comparison and illustration of their unique thematic context. Blocks 10 and 11 have been selected partly because they were organised in 1999, a year that was critical in the history of DasArts, when, after five years of existence, the school voluntarily invited an international external committee to evaluate and assess its achievements.¹⁶

Block 10, ‘Reconciliation and Storytelling’, was perhaps more clearly linked to the world outside the realm of art than any of the preceding blocks. It was inspired by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which advocated storytelling as the medium for initiating the reconciliation process, which sought to lay foundations for the future rather than inflict punishment or wreak revenge. One challenge encountered in this Block was how to discover the sources the South Africans was drawing on as they sought to resolve and prevent conflict in this admirable fashion. In preparation for Block 10, the curators, dramaturge Janine Brogt and philosopher Kees Vuyk, visited South Africa, attended hearings, met with people from diverse fields and finally posed the following questions to DasArts students: “Is it true that our Western art is driven by conflict. Is it possible to have art that places reconciliation centre stage? Does art compensate for something that we have excluded from our daily lives? What does reconciliation mean to each of us?” In Block 10, negotiations and cross-cultural comparisons such as these were not merely points of theoretical discussion with invited sociologists, writers, journalists and theatre makers, because they arose constantly from the very grounded experience of working in a diverse group of participants (including South African students) and from the presence in the school of master storytellers from South Africa (Gcina Mhlope, Mazsizi Kunene, Miriam Thlali and Sibonghile Kuhmalo) who brought with them the long and vital tradition of their culture.

¹⁵ This quote and all others from Barbara van Lindt are from an interview with the author on 2 June 2009.

¹⁶ The inspection committee visited DasArts in June 1999 and consisted of Joop Doorman, Steven Lavine, Kathinka Ditrach van Weringh and Fien Bloemen. The final report concludes, “The committee has established that DasArts satisfies or even anticipates future requirements in art education. DasArts has successfully developed a method that encourages students to discover not only their own artistic strengths but also ways to connect their artistic contribution to the world around them.”

Block 11, focused on what might at first sight seem a more mundane phenomenon. Curated by Welsh director Richard Gough and Dutch historian Rob Berends, *What's Cooking? Still Life, Turbulent Recipes* explored analogies and correlations between food-making and performance-making. Together with anthropologist and Performance Studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett the curators suggested that what we eat, the rituals surrounding food, how food marks out our similarities and differences, food's mythical and symbolic significance, the joy of plenty and the fear of famine and deprivation, are all food for thought and reflection on the human condition. Although food is evidently key to survival, and therefore also political, the curators contended, the preparation, presentation and consumption of food can also be viewed as a complex system of performance. And of course, the first step along this course of learning was to transform one of DasArts' studios into a kitchen and to offer this as a creative tool to visiting artists, lecturers and participants, all of whom bore testament to the theatricality of food and speculated on food as a model for theatre: multisensory, processural and communal.¹⁷

DasArts was never tempted to repeat Blocks or even compare one to another. Although components such as journeys, field trips, workshops, lectures, reading material and presentations reappeared in various forms, one could perhaps best define the specific character of each Block as an entirely new laboratory where students and curators alike often felt breathless and overwhelmed at the sheer amount and variety of events they experienced. Gabriel Smeets and Ibrahim Quaraishi, mentors of Block 24, 'The Political Body', confirm this: "Yes, the pressure was high. The tensions were explosive and, yes, we were dealing with principles of what the Slovenian dramaturge Bojana Kunst would describe as the basics of a creation process: resistance, desire and necessity."¹⁸ This pressure-cooker environment intensified human relationships and produced a collective experience that forced the international community of participating artists to work through internal differences and accept the blurring of divisions between individuals and between authorships. The emphasis in all Blocks is on sketches, ideas and on direct performative response. This meant that the result existed in the moment, vital, perhaps not yet even assimilated or articulated by the participants who created it. Significantly, the subtitle of Block 21, with actors' collective *Maatschappij Discordia*, was "Everything teaches, except experience."¹⁹

It is surely relevant at this point to ponder the issue of whether this assembly of activities and

¹⁷ 'Reconciliation and Storytelling' took place from 15 February to 23 April 1999; 'What's Cooking? Still Life, Turbulent Recipes' took place from 20 September to 26 November 1999.

¹⁸ Smeets, G. and Quaraishi, I., 'Resistance, Desire and Necessity. Essay on Block 24, The Political Body', in *DasArts Activiteitenverslag*, Amsterdam, 2006, p. 20.

¹⁹ Block 21 prologue, first act, second act, third act, fourth act, fifth act, epilogue, encore. With *Maatschappij Discordia*, from 11 September to 19 November 2004.

dynamics adds up to a furthering of knowledge and understanding – and if it does, then in what way? Van Lindt: “Only the people involved can decide whether they have learned something from our Blocks. And it’s possible that the effect will only become apparent over or after a period of time. Perhaps the most likely outcome is that participants come to better understand what they are able to learn, or what is implied by their own method. Often, it is the unexpected things that have the most impact. As with any experiment, you have to have a certain belief in the outcome.”

DasArts implicitly rejected the introduction of either practical or intellectual knowledge as tools for increasing certainty (or at least reducing uncertainty). The school created risk-rich conditions in which to examine the function of knowledge and investigate how the complexity of knowledge could be addressed in a creative way. And it did so without introducing traditional hierarchies or theatre as an art form into a closed knowledge system, because to do so would have been to force individual students to start off from a given set of values. 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 educational model reflected the primary assumption of DasArts: no single individual and no single specialization 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 themselves who were required 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 – connections between one artist and another, between theatre and society, and between theory and practice. In Van Lindt’s view, “DasArts encourages people to liberate themselves from traditional ways of thinking about the location and form of their theatre. In the end, a Block enables students to find powerful tools to make their own choices – about who their collaborators will be, which audiences they want to communicate with to and what subjects they need to address.”

The former DasArts student Sjoerd Wagenaar, for example, established ‘one of the most ordinary’ theatre companies of the country, in a very rural area of Holland: PeerGroup in Drenthe takes local places and communities as the starting point for their site-specific theatre and runs the mobile workshop programme *De Afleiding* (The Distraction) that follows Sjoerd’s intriguing appeal ‘*Graven waar je staat*’ (use what you’ve got). Rachael Swain in Australia and Brett Bailey in South Africa also embrace the collision between contemporary, traditional, and community practices. With their distinct intercultural companies Stalker/Marrugeku and Third World Bunfight they create large-scale performance and

collaborate intensively with indigenous artists.²⁰ Another alumnus, the economist and director Judith Wilske, explores our Western consumer society and the impact of capitalism on human behaviour. She recently followed up her *Why Do You Shop?* project with *Kinder zu Unternehmern* (From Child to Entrepreneur), once again a mix of installation, action and theatre, and one that involves the youngest consumers investing micro-credits in their own enterprises.

Centre stage

Cultural theorist Irit Rogoff believes art education can be a model for educational and cultural activities at large. “It gives permission to ‘start in the middle’,” she explains, “This permission (...) allows those being taught to take centre stage, since they instigate its taking place and allow the processes they go through to become the *substance* rather than the *outcome* of education.”²¹ The unique and dominant use of Blocks as educational components at DasArts should not distract from the fact that DasArts always had a clear, legitimizing focus. In constructive terms, each individual participant was deeply embedded in ongoing exchange with the artistic staff and personal advisors, who facilitated careful evaluation of all the programmes and proposals, and supported students in the drawing of conclusions that would enable them to continue plotting their own course of study.

As a former advisor at DasArts, new director Barbara Van Lindt experienced the complexity of this process: “The main issue for me personally is how I can invest my understanding and know-how without creating an obstacle to what the student intends to do. In what way can I teach artists so that it is valuable for their practice?” DasArts itself conceived of that process as a combination of personal responsibility and institutional challenge, of individual freedom and mutual trust. This is something that is also expressed by the American performance group Goat Island in their Letter to Young Practitioners: “You understand who you are. You understand who you could be. You understand the gap between the two. Sometimes, you close the gap. What if we call that moment ‘The classroom’?”²²

Alongside this considerable space for individual development, DasArts was fully aware that it was nurturing a paradox in art education and maintaining the illusion that we could teach students to become *personalities* and to transform their qualities into specific art practices. While most would probably agree that there are techniques, skills and even tricks that can be taught, as Belgian dramaturge Marianne Van Kerkhoven points out, “The construction of

²⁰ Websites: www.peergroup.nl, www.stalker.com.au, www.thirdworldbunfight.co.za, www.whydoyoushop.com, www.kinder-zu-unternehmern.de

²¹ Rogoff, I., ‘Schools of Thought. Three lecturers from art academies in the USA, Germany and the UK reflect upon strengths and failings of art education today’, in *Frieze*, no. 101, September 2006, p. 146.

²² ‘Goat Island, Letter to a Young Practitioner’, published on www.goatlandperformance.org/writing.htm

one's own creative method is probably one of the most intimate, personal and all-but indescribable human occupations, since it is rooted in the deepest recesses of humanity.”²³ Many artists feel incapable of talking about their creative process – and few recognise, as DasArts contended, that their most important work comes out of *not knowing* what they were doing at the time they are doing it. All in all, then, we are in a bit of a muddle when it comes to institutionalized educational relationships because there is no universally applicable formula. We must pass on our experience, but have to do it differently each time. Although Ten Cate was ambivalent towards his own role as a teacher, he set the tone for the kind of open-minded guidance that DasArts provided over the years: “I want someone to show me something that, however rough it may be, catches me off guard. 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 in which an artist can grow.”²⁴ For DasArts then, there is only one process: a process of questioning, an inquiry that is less about learning a craft or trade (the ‘how’) than it is about exploring the fundamentally philosophical (the ‘why’). The primary task of the school, and of any educator in it, is to participate with the students in asking questions and to contribute to their own creative emancipation. “What this concept of art, shared by the teaching process, really reflects is the responsibility of the artist to be a whole person, a political being as well as a social and cultural one.”²⁵

The uniqueness of DasArts has attracted participants from all walks of the arts and from all over the world. Ten Cate's ‘Loving Resistance Fighters’ studying at his ‘Energy Resource Bank’, were never identifiable by a particular style or interest. DasArts never intended to exclusively produce performance makers – although a preponderance of the participants did have a significant interest in these forms. Optimizing specific talents led, as often as not, to a change in the direction students’ studies took: from director to producer or curator; 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 cobbler. Because the programme was so intensive and the community so demanding, DasArts preferred to select students that had acquired at least some professional experience, that 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. The Block structure and the degree of self-determination students were required to exploit allowed space for those who wished to continue their practice

²³ Van Kerkhoven, M., ‘DasArts and the (im)possibility of art education’ (1998), partly published in *DasArts*, Amsterdam, 2000, p. 99.

²⁴ Ten Cate, R., ‘Remains of the Day’, in *DasArts*, Amsterdam, 1994, p. 47.

²⁵ Kosuth, J., *A room with 23 qualities*, Hamburg: Edition Cantz, 1992.

outside the school. But more often, DasArts' impact on the arts world at large is evidenced by the flourishing of a wide range of unpredictable post-study collaborations.

This tale of the admirable position taken up by DasArts is, however, only half of the story. DasArts also formulated another – perhaps utopian – ideal for its participants. The rejection of conventional knowledge transfer caused DasArts' attention to shift from past and present to that which does not yet exist; from the institutionalization of art in education to an institutional critique interrogating commonly accepted professional practice. From 1994, DasArts welcomed its students with a powerful statement that claims, "We cannot know what theatre should or will be tomorrow. Participants in our post-academic studies programme have the responsibility to show us what the future will be."²⁶ Somehow, DasArts assumed that the students would be able to operate, develop and blossom in the field of tension between the intimate attention to individual artistic development and the school's explicit demand for pioneers. DasArts challenged its students to work with a growing confidence in the belief that a reliance on intuition, chance, dream, accident and impulse would not exclude politics from their work. Many students had a very strong sense of their time, and felt clearly what it was to live in a world of second-, third- and fourth-hand experiences; of CNN and late-night television; of half-remembered stories, and of fragmentation and the search for identity. Living in a complex, theatricalised environment, they valued the immediacy of theatre and wanted to establish a true relationship with their audience.

In her recent performance *Point Blank*, former DasArts student Edit Kaldor uses the stage, digital media and the screen to express the isolation and loneliness of her generation, while Petra Ardai's Space company engages even more directly with life itself, discussing the shifting identity of migrants, in a grey zone between reality and fiction. Nicola Nord of andcompany&Co. dreams of a theatre "for the global village, a theatre that uproots itself and starts to wander around again." In her view, the very essence of theatre is the encounter with people and the collaboration between them. "Because there is a promise hidden in theatre making: the promise to do something together!"²⁷

Futures

In 1998, Marianne Van Kerhoven was probably the first to articulate the dilemma that DasArts had apparently created for itself. While curating Block 9, she sensed that the school was operating an ever-changing, ever-moving organism characterised by an apparent refusal to learn, one that went hand in hand with continual redefinition of its programme as a norm

²⁶ DasArts, 'Statement of Purpose' (1994), in *DasArts*, Amsterdam, 2000, p. 74.

²⁷ DasArts alumnus Nicola Nord (andcompany&Co.), *DasArts Digital Dodge*, no. 25, 2006, p. 18. Websites: www.andco.de, www.spaceworld.nl

and celebration of the incomparability of individual experiences. In the first of her three essays on DasArts, Van Kerkhoven emphasized that the formulation of a theory is necessary to substantiate any practice aimed at advancing knowledge and passing on stored knowledge to future generations. “Perhaps,” she proposed, “a ‘contemplative component’ should be added to DasArts work, one where (in a compromise between the great freedom that exists now and the disadvantages this freedom brings) the search is made for ‘free theorization’? Or does theorization inevitably mean that things become irrevocably fixed? It must surely be possible to develop a pattern of thinking that does not squeeze all the life out of life. If we who are, more or less, insiders do not write about it, then outsiders will. So let’s get there before them.”²⁸

The changes of director at DasArts (in 2000, 2004 and 2009) are particularly interesting in this context, because although Alida Neslo and Moniek Toebosch were, like Ten Cate, artists themselves, they brought their entirely distinct sets of interests to the school. Neslo drew on her non-European heritage and her desire to extend DasArts’ culture beyond the West. Moniek Toebosch continued her strong involvement with experimental arts practices and opened DasArts more than ever to the vital (then and now) field of performance art. Together with dramaturge Georg Weinand, Toebosch in particular responded to DasArts’ implicit impossibilities. Although they had no ambition to organize the ‘contemplative section’ that Van Kerkhoven proposed, they did start to evaluate the position of DasArts by setting up a series of public discussions in 2006 and 2007, asking ‘What does a young artist really need?’ They engaged more intensively with DasArts as a community of peers, learning with and from each other. From then on, regular collective critique sessions (Chips & Dips) remained an essential tool for the exercising of students’ self-reflection and the building up of an artistic discourse within the school. In the same period, DasArts also started to more frequently engage with the world outside its doors, by obliging its students to test their works-in-progress in front of audiences. Co-productions with professional venues, festivals such as DasArts Daily (in 2005, DasArts’ tenth anniversary), DasArts Meets De Bank (2007, in collaboration with Victoria, Ghent), and special evenings entitled Fresh Fruit (which toured local theatres) aimed not only to present new works, but also to communicate the climate and the methods that the school had to offer to dialogue with the field – a field that has, says Moniek Toebosch, “changed considerably since DasArts was founded in 1994. The need to gather under one roof and develop concepts together seems to be becoming less self-evident. We are involved in a digital conversation that is detached from time, place and

²⁸ Van Kerkhoven, M., op. cit., pp. 104–5.

action.” But before DasArts could redefine its own time, place and action, it was hit by a new reality. “Who will make the final decisions about this? Us or them? You or me?”²⁹

The closing of this hybrid, independently minded school did not come as a surprise. By the end of 2008 the field of higher education in the Netherlands was integrated fully into the Bologna Process, ending the situation that allowed for hybrid (education-arts) institutions such as DasArts to exist outside of the BA-MA structure. DasArts was forced to assess its predicament and to make a clear choice: to take distance from education and battle for acceptance (and funding) as an arts institute or to explore the potential of offering the first and, until now, only Master of Theatre programme in the Netherlands.

Following intensive negotiations both inside and outside the institute, Toebosch remained true to her claim for maximum autonomy for DasArts as an artist’s laboratory and resigned. The dedicated staff she left behind is still benefitting from her uncompromising energy, but has decided to contribute to an entirely new chapter in the DasArts story. The present circumstances could be compared to the contested situation at the very beginning of DasArts. The school has agreed to transform itself to an officially recognised Master of Theatre programme and join the Theatre faculty at the Amsterdam School of the Arts. Never before has DasArts been so explicitly a part of the educational establishment. And this is precisely the challenge to which the recently appointed director Barbara Van Lindt is committed.

Here and Now

Imagine: you visit DasArts in its present location on some sunny afternoon in June 2009; the elongated old school building almost hidden away, adjacent to the Oosterpark, extending deep into the greenery. Someone invites you into the hallway, allowing you time to appreciate the Amsterdam School architecture, the open doors to offices and studios, the careful arrangement of tables and benches and the stairs that lead to the library. You are offered a coffee; in the kitchen someone is cleaning up after the previous night’s culinary extravagances. In the main hall you still find signs of this year’s graduation ceremony with Rose Fenton (former director of the LIFT Festival) as the honorary Chair. The candles on the huge chandelier have obviously burned all night. Wandering through the building you see the artistic staff discussing the next Block, an advisor having a private conversation with a student and a group gathering in the garden. Perhaps you notice some of the many artworks (by Paul Thek, Joseph Beuys, Les Levine, Richard Longo and other protagonists of the 1970s) generously gifted to DasArts by Ritsaert ten Cate before he died in September 2008.

²⁹ Toebosch, M., *DasArts Digital Dodge*, no. 25, 2006, p. 5.

The school's home is the peaceful, familial and inspiring place that the story of DasArts promises. There is no trace to be seen of the intensive process of transformation that the school has recently undergone.

Let there be no mistake, in many ways the recent self-evaluation, integration into the Amsterdam School of the Arts and application for accreditation as a Master of Theatre contradicted the intuitive nature of the journey that characterised the school's pioneering years. This new process was all about negotiating; about understanding, formulating, and framing what DasArts does and what it wants to achieve; about answering questions (primarily posed by outsiders) in order to assess and guarantee the quality of DasArts' practice. Now that this process is complete, DasArts is assuming it has gone far enough in installing the instruments of comparison proposed by the Bologna Process – and hoping it will not end up in a flat landscape of standardized curricula.³⁰ But as the Belgian philosopher Dieter Lesage says, these instruments “may show the incomparability as much as the comparability of its subjects. (...) So far, the Bologna Process has proved more successful at showing all the differences between educational systems in its expanded version of Europe than at homogenizing it.”³¹ There is little doubt that by becoming a Master of Theatre DasArts has, to a degree, lost its innocence. It has lost its stubborn will to *not know* and to find things out only by *doing*. Despite this, DasArts has successfully championed its core principles and is ready to use the transformation process to improve its work from a position of strength.

DasArts now finds itself on the brink of a future about which we can only speculate. What is certain is that the school has shifted position in two important ways: it is placing even more emphasis on the (focussed guidance of the) individual routes taken by the participants and the review of DasArts' contribution to the field – complementing the growing number of other structures producing and supporting young professional artists.

Van Lindt points out that, on a global scale, recent years have seen a spectacular expansion of the network of temporary academies, summer schools and residencies. Although beneficial for young artists in many respects, this development also has its downsides: “If you are a professional nomad and depend on these flexible possibilities, you become uprooted and strangely isolated by your mobile existence, the lack of a sense of belonging and your dependence on the Internet. It worries me to see that much work at festivals at the moment has no sense of place – you simply can't tell where it was made.”³² In this regard, then,

³⁰ A series of critical symposia on the Bologna Process was recently organized by Henk Slager from the Utrecht School of the Arts: *A Certain Ma-Ness and Nameless Science* (2009); *Becoming Bologna* in (2009). www.mahku.nl/news/759.html

³¹ Lesage, D., ‘The Academy is Back: On Education, the Bologna Process, and the Doctorate in the Arts’ in *e-flux journal*, 45. New York, 2009. Website: www.e-flux.com.

³² Outstanding examples for artist-driven academies in the performing arts are the project *Bocal* by choreographer Boris

continuity, collectivity and hospitality are, more than ever, crucial qualities that DasArts has to offer. “As a school we can afford a kind of sustainability that is deeply appreciated by participants, who commit themselves to stay for two years. Here, they are welcomed with all their concerns into the building, the team, the feedback, the exchange with international peers and the dynamics of the institute as a self-evaluating body.”

Locally, too, the situation has recently changed. With its emphasis on practice and artistic development, DasArts has, throughout its existence, remained particularly close to the vibrant field of workshop theatres and production houses (whose task is also to assist young talents). But, following a thorough reorganisation of the Dutch arts funding system, these institutions have become part of an explicitly predefined chain that promotes theatre in the Netherlands as a consecution of talent development, production and reception. Faced with this linear thinking, DasArts chose to act as an alternative to it.³³ DasArts will be a satellite to the tight professional infrastructure, providing an experimental space that will continue to advocate the importance of unpredictable sidetracks and radical imbalance – in the both the arts and in education.

Like any other accredited Master’s programme, DasArts is obliged to stipulate the qualifications of “the expected attributes of a student following completion of the second cycle” and set up general devices to facilitate the ongoing discussion of students’ ambitions, struggles and growth from a common frame of reference.³⁴ Interestingly, Van Lindt sees what might be viewed as the biggest threat Bologna poses as a real opportunity to direct DasArts’ more critically and develop its qualities more consciously. The intention, then, is neither to systematize school life, nor to exclude subjective engagement, but rather to enable staff members and advisors to deal with the great diversity of paths chosen by students. “Artists today have so much freedom to access sources, experiment with ideas and choose their own methods; I feel that many still need to develop a deeper awareness; I want students to be able to think things through. This is something I very much want to tackle at DasArts. We have to introduce a culture of more considered experimentation throughout the programme.” In order to make DasArts’ embrace of individual studies and assessment even more explicit, one of the two blocks each year will be replaced by a ‘Contextual’, a fresh, much shorter, format that will be curated by staff and students who will jointly develop an alternative to the

Charmatz and the *Mobile Academy* by Hannah Hurtzig, curator of DasArts’ Block 5. <http://edna-edna.blogspot.com>, www.mobileacademy-berlin.com.

³³ In January 2009, the Dutch central government arts funding system was reorganised, creating a ‘Basics infrastructure’. This requires that each funded arts institute must fulfil a well-defined function within a coherent field. In the performing arts the government supports a limited number of orchestras, ensembles, companies, production houses, festivals and network organisations that together form the two pillars of the structure: maintenance and development.

³⁴ These qualifications – or ‘aims in educating young theatre professionals’ – are based on the Joint Dublin Descriptors for Short Cycle-, First Cycle-, Second Cycle- and Third Cycle Awards that were proposed in 2004 for the European Higher Education Area, as part of the Bologna Process. Website: www.jointquality.nl

'pressure cooker' method of teaching; one that is more in tune with the students' own demands and questions, and more open to contemplation and reflection.

Van Lindt is unique among previous directors of DasArts in that she is not, herself, an artist. She is, however, a practitioner in the sense that she creates conditions for making art and she has already twice managed and transformed existing organisations with a burdening legacy.³⁵ She is committed to developing DasArts' ties with other theatre training programmes and discovering whether its unusual practice will be fully acknowledged, as a new kind of 'in-between-place' – within education and responding to the professional field. She has taken a confident lead by creating the framework of the first Block of her tenure herself. Block 30 will see staff, students and guest teachers embarking on a journey to re-examine the core business of DasArts: learning – by looking, by living and by teaching. With gentle modesty that belies her determination, Van Lindt admits, "It is my introduction into the world of art education."

In 2005, the former DasArts student and curator (of Block 7) Hein Ebersson posed the question "What are DasArts?" to the entire student body. Then, within 24 hours, he collected, collated, designed, printed and distributed the results.³⁶ For those who have shaped, witnessed, or even fought DasArts over the years, the range of answers contained in the publication might prove reassuring; there were as many propositions as there were responding participants. DasArts seemed to exist as much in the evolving community as in any particular project, collaboration or event. The one thing that united everyone involved was the belief in artistic development, rigorous investment and an emphasis on the creative potential of the academy.

It is perhaps true that DasArts neglected to sufficiently reflect its internal changes and continued building with the same components for too long – while the organisation of the school shifted and the international field moved on. Under the leadership of Ritsaert ten Cate, with his rare ability to sniff out talent and imagine growth – unconditionally – DasArts as an institution could bear the absence of structure, continuity, criteria and rules. After Ten Cate resigned as director of DasArts in 2000 his successors, Neslo and Toebosch, went some way to liberating the school from this single possibility and gradually opened it up to other original approaches. The present director and her team, however, are not intending to adapt an existing artistic project. They are proudly determined in their commitment to DasArts' new role as a Master of Theatre programme, and looking forward to facing the

³⁵ Theater Gasthuis in Amsterdam and WPZimmer in Antwerp. Until her appointment for DasArts in June 2009, Van Lindt was a programmer at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels. She has also acted as adviser for DasArts.

³⁶ 'What are DasArts?' was produced as part of the festival 'DasArts Daily' in the Frascati Theatre, Amsterdam, 2005.

challenges and expressing more explicitly the school's depth of experience and exciting pedagogy.

Those educators and artists who are deeply concerned by the prospect of the systemized world of higher education promised by the Bologna Process, may consider Franz Kafka's ominous words apt: "There is hope, but not for us."³⁷ But for those who courageously conclude that change can and must work through the system, let us joyfully turn Kafka's dark view on its head and say, 'We are here, so there is hope.'

³⁷ Quoted by Ten Cate in: Ten Cate, R., 'Once More with Feeling', in Brand, J., Ten Cate, R., Colenbrander, A., De Muijnck, C. (eds.), *The Art Academy of the 21st Century*. Groningen: Profiel AMP 13, 1999, p. 255.