

# Who's afraid of (art) education? Some indecent proposals

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*The following is the edited version of a public lecture held on the occasion of DasArts' 11th anniversary, Amsterdam 17 June 2005*

When I left DasArts in 2001 I was filled with doubts: doubts about art academies in general and doubts about our little school in particular. For a long time, I had felt stuck in my own ways of thinking, full of slogans and ideologies that did not want to leave me. I felt I would be repeating the same story forevermore, mumbling about participants being the theatre of the future whenever the issue of education came up. Notions that had once functioned as keywords had come to sound more like slippery clichés. But let us face facts: we have heard this sort of overused slogan too often, and anyway many of DasArts' principles are being promoted by a growing number of initiatives.

One of the core precepts of DasArts was, and is, that with every new learning period, or 'block', the school would be questioned and reinvented. But having been involved in eleven study programmes I wondered if we had really kept our promise; what was really needed was not merely to *expand* our system yet again, but to forcibly eject ourselves from our own territory, forever.

Let me put it like this: I did not get into education because I was specifically interested in teaching and learning per se. I was excited by the uncertainty of the situation that Ritsaert ten Cate had offered to me. And I was interested in creating innovative work in the performing arts. The challenge remains: how can these objectives be combined?

Returning to my departure from DasArts: I was under the strong impression that we were almost incapable of taking critical distance from our own practice. We had been on a highly intuitive journey, during which we had had the courage to trust in the paths we were travelling without necessarily needing, or being able, to fully articulate what we were doing or why we were doing it.

Now that I am searching for a more fundamental criticality towards the educational platforms I identify with, I keep asking myself these four crucial questions:

Why is it that we want to 'do right' in education?

How do we know what knowledge is useful?

What will succeed the concept of interdisciplinarity?

What are the specific characteristics of the field of the performing arts?

The school I would like to discuss, then, is not the school I created with Ritsaert ten Cate, neither is it the Amsterdam School of the Arts with which I am affiliated at the moment, it is a school as a speculation, a series of thoughts that might – or might not – lead to new potentials.

1.

When we celebrate the anniversary of a school, what is it exactly that we are celebrating? Is it the great effect this school has on the individuals and groups involved

(as evidenced by the works presented), or are we specifically celebrating the practice of the school itself: the educational strategies that make DasArts a school?

On a more general level one could argue that with DasArts' anniversary, we are celebrating our faith in a very particular type of enterprise – the enterprise of education, the enterprise of obtaining some knowledge or skill by a learning process.

As educators we are – I am afraid – full of good intentions. We believe in progress: we make a conscious effort to bridge the gap between the informed and the uninformed; we want to foster individual development and enable people to upgrade their abilities; we are interested in good people and want to make them capable citizens or professionals. We are also, and I say this without cynicism, constantly thinking of how to change and improve the learning environments we have created, in order to change and improve the effect they have on our students.

'Wanting to do right in education' means accepting the system of education and wanting to make it work. But if this approach constantly justifies itself, then one may wonder how education can be critically examined.

During Mode05, a recent expert meeting on choreography and education in Potsdam, I was introduced to a provocative book written by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière entitled *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.<sup>1</sup> Primarily it is the story of Joseph Jacotot, an exiled French schoolteacher, who in 1818 devised an unconventional teaching method that caused uproar within the European academic community. Jacotot, who knew no Flemish, found himself able to teach in French to Flemish students who knew no French. Knowledge, Jacotot concluded, was not necessary to teach, neither was explication necessary to learn. The results of this unusual experiment in pedagogy led him to announce that all people were equally intelligent, and to devise a philosophy and method for what he called 'intellectual emancipation'.

Rancière, commenting on his own book, emphasises the contemporary implications of the story: 'I would like [...] to show that what we are dealing with here is not merely an amusing journey into the history of pedagogy, but a philosophical reflection, entirely up-to-date, on the manner in which pedagogical reason and social reason hold together.'<sup>2</sup> Rancière's core proposition is that the school does not wish to know. It fails in the mission of reducing social and intellectual inequality because it is ignorant of the functioning of its own logic, which propagates inequality by its very efforts to mitigate it.

The enterprise of education always consists – however and wherever it is carried out – of a person or group doing the educating, and a person or group being educated. Pedagogical reason presents itself as the act that lifts the veil and reveals things. The usual mechanism is 'explanation', which is considered a social method for laying out the elements of a particular area of knowledge that must be transmitted in a manner appropriate for the limited capacity of the minds under instruction. But this apparently simple concept is, on closer inspection, subject to infinite regression: explanation is generally accompanied by an explanation of the explanation, for example by educators who explain the explanation that permits the student to comprehend. And so on.

In Rancière's view, school is a place where control and knowledge should come together in harmony and optimise the social function of the institution. His critique does not proscribe the construction of schools, programmes or pedagogies, but he attacks over-inflated expectations of a school charged with overcoming the actual inequality.

So what are the consequences of the ignorant schoolmaster's work? He decides not to explain, and sets out to activate the latent capability of the person seeking knowledge. He obliges another intelligence to exercise itself – independent of any knowledge the educator possesses.

The method Jacotot proposes is the oldest in the world, and it is verified daily in all circumstances where an individual must learn something when no explanation is available. But here lies the paradox: 'No one wants to recognise it, no one wants to cope with the intellectual revolution it signifies. The social circle, the order of things, prevents it from being recognised for what it is: the true method by which everyone learns and by which everyone can take the measure of his capacity. One must dare to recognise it and pursue an open verification of its power – otherwise the method of powerlessness, the Old Master, will last as long as the order of things.'<sup>3</sup>

Seen in the light of Jacotot's story, 'wanting to do right in education' is apparently a trap. But what would be the alternative to 'doing right', of serving the traditional logic of education and confirming the circle of power? Deliberately doing wrong? I do not think so. But I do believe that if a school, as a producer within society, wants to propose or provide an opportunity for emancipation, it has to reassess the functioning of the educational machine as a social machine. And it must reassess the relationship in which education takes place – the relationship between educator and student

'Who, then, would want to begin?' Jacotot asks.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most radical critics of institutionalised education in modern economies is the Austrian historian Ivan Illich. Already in the early 1970s he called for 'deschooling': the deconstruction of centralised control, nationalised curricula, and the increasing bureaucratic accreditation of learning. Although his passionate advocacy of more convivial forms of education was never likely to make much headway – then or now – it is striking that long before one could speak of a common network culture, he suggested the use of advanced technology to support learning webs in which each participant both teaches and learns.

With this early vision on education as a web of 'informal connectedness', Illich introduces a notion that I happily add to my list of speculative queries: how can a school embrace diverse educational relationships, provide a variety of opportunities for involvement, and consider equality not as a goal to be achieved, but as a point of departure?

2.

In addition to my doubts about the process of learning in educational systems, I am extremely uncertain as to how I should relate to the idea of knowledge itself. The situation we set up during my time at DasArts was contradictory. On the one hand, we claimed that our understanding of knowledge is exclusively linked to (the formation of) the individual. And this makes sense within the context of the arts: 'Everyone agrees that there are techniques, skills and even tricks that can be learnt. But the construction of one's own creative method is probably one of the most intimate, personal and almost indescribable human occupations, since it is rooted in the deepest inner being of man.'<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, we were still introducing huge amounts of information, study material and experience that we expected people to learn from. From time to time there was confusion, and I still wonder how the two domains relate to each other. Who knows?

I think we are aware of the function of knowledge to gain certainty (or, if you prefer, to reduce uncertainty). In respect to art education, however, I am interested in how the complexity of knowledge can be explored in a creative way, and how a school can keep investigating the function of knowledge in a 'state of risking'.

An example: Hannah Hurtzig (mentor at DasArts in 1996) recently developed an exciting format for researching knowledge as an economical, political and cultural resource: for one night only, she turned Berlin's HAU Theater into a showroom for the Black Market of Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge. At 40 small tables, 100 experts in different fields offered 30 minutes of their product to individual members of the

audience. The audience could book an expert and acquire this knowledge in a private dialogue.

I was particularly struck by two aspects of my experiences at the Black Market. Firstly, the subversion of the hierarchy between different qualities of knowledge: the Black Market allowed engagement with knowledge from the most sophisticated and the most trivial perspectives, and presented the experts from science, craft, philosophy, art or just daily life as complementary to one another. Secondly, the event was based on the performative character of knowledge as an encounter, and during this encounter the 'state of knowing' constantly changes ownership. On this night, knowledge appeared as a living archive, as a collective, whispered story – growing and evolving as we participated.

So how can a school investigate the function of knowledge in a 'state of risking'? What are the risky moments for a school? Tim Etchells the UK artist, and leader of Forced Entertainment, expands on this subject in his collection of writings on performance, *In Certain Fragments*: 'Risk and investment in the strangest places, slipping and hiding. Risk is the thing we are striving for in performance but not a thing we can look for. We look for something else and hope (or pray to the gods we don't believe in) that risk shows up. We know it when we see it, I'm sure of that. Risk surprises us, always fleeting – we're slightly out of control.'<sup>6</sup> Slipping, hiding, fleeting, praying – these are not words usually applied in education. But I would like to propose at least two 'states of risking' that could be relevant for both the individual student and the educational organisation: the notion of research and the notion of failure.

For the Italian art historian Giulio Carlo Argan, an open approach to the concept of 'useful and non-useful knowledge' (as performed by Hannah Hurtzig) is a prerequisite for artistic research even to take place. He claims: 'The idea that art should be a research takes profile when the art itself is not stably inserted in a knowledge system, and when the knowledge itself is not conceived as a closed and unitary system any more. The art as research does not start from the *given* values.'<sup>7</sup>

I feel that the possibility – or even the need – for research processes has been fairly well integrated into educational settings. It might be that research has become a cheap and unfinished mode of production that offers few insights into its methodology, objectives or degree of self-reflection that would make it different from any other product in the arts.

It is far more difficult to incorporate the right to fail into the larger scheme of a school. How, for example, does failure become a form of knowledge? Is there any place for the term 'failure' in the context of learning? And I do not mean a situation where we are merely not doing very well, but the truly traumatic experience of incapability: when plans collapse and great hopes die.

Failure is mostly viewed as an exit. But let us suppose, in the spirit of Gilles Deleuze, and in this school as a speculation, that failure is a beginning. Let us suppose from the very outset that it is of a process intrinsic to its potentialities: failure and non-failure need each other at any moment of their progress and development. Just as, while being developed, knowledge needs non-knowledge, art needs non-art, or philosophy needs non-philosophy.

I have avoided speaking about the apparent opposite of knowledge – not-knowing, or ignorance – as a motor for producing sense. In this age of information overkill (whether cognitive or sensory), it might seem something of an affectation to pretend not to know, or even to use 'not-knowing' as a playful strategy. In a workshop that my research group recently organised with the Springdance festival and the postgraduate studies

programme Dance Unlimited, the Belgian dance writer Jeroen Peters critically examined our proposal to treat performance *As if We Don't Know What it Is* (title). He asked: 'How do we relate to things we don't know? How do we acknowledge not-knowing? How do we remain silent in front of things we don't know? How do we represent not-knowing? How do we construct not-knowing? How do we provoke not-knowing? How do we claim not-knowing? How do we disclaim not-knowing? How do we make not-knowing productive?'<sup>8</sup>

In fact, Peters was expressing his doubt that the blind spot of our action, perception and communication can ever be distinguished from our mental constructions and projections. The 'not-knowing' is in his view a discursive site that is always affected by knowledge – especially bodily knowledge – without us even being aware of it.

The French choreographer Boris Charmatz (a contributor to the workshop) responded to this with an interesting artistic method, his *Guessing Strategies*, whereby an imagined dance is created rather than an executed one, or a story rather than an action: 'There is always a space behind oneself, a presence at the back that gnaws what manifests itself in the body, in the lights, in the sound, in the space. Tribes of phantoms organise the work, a constant game between the manifested and the non-manifested.'<sup>9</sup>

Can a school allow itself to guess about knowledge? I would hope so. Knowledge as desire, as performance, as ghosts, as research, as failure. Could Hannah Hurtzig's *Black Market* be a school? A resource-based community of learning? Immediate, inclusive *and* performative? Does it matter that it only lasts for one night?

3.

I am much inspired by non-institutional learning environments, and for the last two years I have been working as Associate Professor at the Amsterdam School of the Arts and leading a research group for Art Practice & Development. Part of my job is to look at art practice in an interdisciplinary context and to stimulate the exchange with crossovers in the professional arts world. I love my job, and I think it is very valuable to throw the doors of the initial training programmes wide open. But I must confess that it also bothers me that interdisciplinarity is still introduced as a novel concept, or at least as an innovative practice that we should strive for. I am convinced that this mission has already been accomplished and that the term is no longer useful when considering the artistic developments of our time.

We have reached a point where the very existence of interdisciplinary work is no longer an issue, and it can finally be taken for granted that an approach across unusual divides belongs to the reality of contemporary art practice. That interdisciplinarity is still spoken of as a practice separate, or excluded from, other practices in the arts, might then be a misunderstanding, or at best a political strategy in a time when interdisciplinarity is insufficiently acknowledged in institutional settings.

In her paper *Academy as Potentiality*, Irit Rogoff dispels some of the illusions that most of us held on to throughout the 1980s and 1990s: 'Interdisciplinarity is really nothing more than a play with boundaries. [...] No, what we have to do is to juxtapose to this logic another logic and ask how would it look if we operated differently?'<sup>10</sup> Rogoff reminds us that the story of interdisciplinarity is the story of thinking in terms of similarity and difference, one that encourages homogeneity; the defining of the one in the light of the other.

In that sense, the focus on, or the belief in, interdisciplinarity, has probably distracted us from acknowledging the artistic developments that have taken place within certain genres and that have destabilised traditional disciplines and changed the perception of current theatre, dance, music, film, architecture or visual arts. It is unhelpful to continue claiming a separate place for the use of 'inter-', 'mixed-', 'multi-' or

'trans-' strategies as long as it confuses the challenge to be more specific about distinctive attachments and desires of cultural formats: 'The law of touching in this context is not fusion, but separation. It is the heterogeneity of surfaces that touch each other. Heterogeneity that stimulates further heterogenesis.'<sup>11</sup>

In relation to dance, the Swedish dramaturg Märten Spångberg proposed replacing the term 'multimedia', with 'media-multi': 'It's not a question of mixing and collaborating across media and disciplines,' he said, 'but specifically doing choreography by way of other media and disciplines.'<sup>12</sup> In accordance with this view, then, innovative dance makers are not intent on leaving the field of dance, but seek to penetrate the edge of the discipline as part of a constant negotiation, creating a situation whereby – from the point of view of the moving body – a variety of dissimilar domains (such as media, speech, music and social or cultural contexts) are set into motion.

In a recent project with opera director Pierre Audi on the adaptation of opera for film and other media, I observed that young artists in interdisciplinary collaborations often tend to synchronize their behaviour, and only slowly discover the method of co-existence whereby there is not a unified single entity, but abandonment and exposure to one another.

Probably it would be only a slight shift, but I believe that if we were to stop calling for the recognition of interdisciplinarity as a new zone: a hybrid practice would have to be taken for what it is: not as a play with boundaries, but as a desire to exhaustively explore a discipline – a real struggle for meaning within a particular field of the arts. For a school however, this operation is almost an ethical issue, because if we do not want to limit the aesthetic frame, we find ourselves operating within an infinite network of structures. And then what? How do ensure that we do not provoke indifference and lose ourselves in the unrestricted production of cultural events? How do we make sure that we care, and insist on the necessity of a point of view?

4.

A final consideration: I have set myself the task of addressing the question of whether there is anything specific about the performing arts that could apply to educational principles. Or in slightly more simple terms: does it matter that a school is concerned particularly with theatre?

To illuminate this facet of the subject I collected some beautiful quotes – from Jan Ritsema, Tim Etchells, Hans-Thies Lehmann, even Paolo Virno – that are all passionate about the uniqueness of theatre as one of the last places in our cultural landscape where we gather life and where we are invited to be here and to be now: to feel exactly what it is to be in this place and in this time. Thoughts about the political nature of theatre as an organised public space that cannot exist without an audience and cannot exist – because of its ephemeral nature – without topicality. All together more than desirable ambitions that I happily take into account when I 'make school'.

But there is another example that I am almost too embarrassed to name.

In June of 2005, with peers from my temporary initiative An Academy at the Holland Festival, I was about to watch Peter Sellars' Bach Cantatas, when, all of a sudden, Sellars got on stage and announced that the central character, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, was in a great deal of pain and would only be able to perform the second part of the programme, Cantata No.82 'Ich habe genug'. Sellars took some time to inform the full house of how his own encounter with Bach's cantatas and the rehearsal period had been affected by great crisis and how the music answered their need for comfort and hope, up to a point where death appeared, not as an enemy, not as panic, not as a farewell, but as the beginning of something. Before Sellars quit the stage, he left us with

questions of uncomplicated clarity: 'What is a good death? What do we see when these eyes close and the inner light opens?'<sup>13</sup>

For god's sake! I thought. How dare he use his seductive storytelling to trigger the emotional reactions of the audience? How dare he ask such questions on some ordinary Thursday night? How dare he expose me to suffering and loss while I sit here next to someone I have never met? Is it just another trick or am I really involved?

But from the moment the music started and the marvellous singer's voice issued forth, there was no doubt that Sellars' Bach Cantatas did indeed dare. And without delay I was cut into my deepest fears and emotions.

I cannot help it, it keeps happening to me, and although very rare, moments such as these are the most satisfying that I know of in theatre: it is the sense of community that turns 'me' into 'we', and reminds me that my being is full of a wanting, a wanting to 'be with' and to be part of the shared sensations that make us human.

The question remains: can a school recreate any of this?

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<sup>1</sup> Jaques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation, Stanford 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Jaques Rancière, opening address at the 5<sup>th</sup> International Summer Academy, Frankfurt, August 20, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Jaques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Stanford 1991, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Marianne Van Kerkhoven *On the (im)possibility of art education*, her first, unpublished, text on DasArts, Brussels 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments*, London 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Giulio Carlo Argan, after: *Matko Mestrovic, Computer<sup>2</sup> and Visual Research – Ways of thinking and scope of acting*, lecture at Stuttgart 1960, Computers in Theory and Art, Schloss Solitude, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Jeroen Peeters, *As if we don't know what it is*, proposals for performance in shifting contexts; reading the proposal, phrasing words, strands and questions, written for the mini-conference organised by Dance Unlimited, Springdance and the research group for Art Practice and Development, April 8-10, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Irit Rogoff, *Academy as Potentiality*, address given at Mode05 on March 19, 2005, [www.mode05.org](http://www.mode05.org).

<sup>11</sup> Bojana Cvejic, *Collectivity? You mean Collaboration*, Brussels 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Mårten Spångberg, quoted from my notes on Mode05, Potsdam March 13-19, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Quote from the introduction to Bach Cantatas on June 16, 2005. The performance was part of the programme of An Academy. Under the title 'An Academy', the research group for Arts Practice and Development (Marijke Hoogenboom) and Theater Gasthuis co-produce a series of experimental, non-institutional learning situations.