

## **What is it we are a part of?**

*On Gender and Radical Art Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

Talk by Catherine Somzé (Dirty Art Department, Amsterdam) in the frame of the Magma festival in collaboration with the École de Recherche Graphique (Super School) at KANAL Pompidou, 15 May 2019

The question at the heart of the Magma festival is: “What is it we are part of?” (*De quoi est-ce que l'on participe?*). This is a highly relevant question in many regards but more so perhaps in the frame of an event taking place in a dependence of the Pompidou, facing Molenbeek –on the other side of the canal—a neighborhood infamous for its role in the November 2015 Paris attacks.

In this context, I think it is unavoidable to mention the debate that surrounded its inception as many have contested the project on several accounts leading to protests on the day of its opening. (I guess this introductory part of my talk will be most relevant to those of you who come from abroad as the Brussels-based public here will more surely be acquainted with that debate already.)

Detractors condemned KANAL for its perceived use as an instrument of gentrification and city branding. Its bordering location with Molenbeek –a diverse neighborhood where ethno-cultural diversity and poverty intersect—in combination with Pompidou’s arguably pitch perfect modern art collection were seen as signs the endeavor should be understood as “artwashing” or the use of art for future financial gain. In other words, KANAL was seen as the perfect weapon in real estate and city branding warfare meant to contribute to Brussels’ increasing appeal for both tourists and potential investors.

Other critics, however, are skeptical KANAL’s opening will in any way ensue in a “Bilbao Effect.” They rather see the project as obscene financial support to a wealthy global art brand in times of austerity in their own country. In the face of national cultural cuts in Belgium, the commission of works and other forms of money redistribution to the local community set up as part of KANAL rather feel to them as a school example of “curatorial glocalization.” They are meant to shush the local art crowd by upholding a sense of ownership while customizing its standard product for easier local consumption. All this, while many local art institutions are in dire straights, or in need of more financial support.

Such criticisms can be contested in their turn for their paradoxical ideological nature. While traditionally associated with forms of left-wing opposition to state control of the arts, these kinds of critiques reflect a yearning for its very implementation. Under which conditions should the State see it as its duty to salvage national art institutions

from disappearing? As Hito Steyerl once scathingly described, this type of critique shows an attempt to: '(...) retreat into the ruins of a demolished national welfare state and its cultural shells and to defend them against all intruders. That is –it tends to defend itself ultimately from the perspective of its other enemies, namely the nativist and indigenist critics of institutions, who want to transform it into a sort of sacralised ethnopark.'<sup>i</sup>

Whatever position on the topic one takes, it is just too easy to cast blame on others without exploring one's own implication in those very processes. As Andrea Fraser, another seminal theorist of institutional critique and its critique, once pointedly described (and I quote): 'Every time we speak of the "institution" as other than "us," we disavow our role in the creation and perpetuation of its conditions.' The question then becomes today: 'What kind of institution we are, what kind of values we institutionalize, what forms of practice we reward, and what kinds of rewards we aspire to?''<sup>ii</sup>

The institution I will be referring to won't, further, be KANAL (as I know way too little about it). It won't be either the specific blend of curation and art education MAGMA seems to be (so I won't be talking about the 'Educational Turn' either). I will rather focus on some of the implications of an art educational program such as the DAD and I think I can say –as far as I have been able to understand its premise—Super School.

These initiatives feel fresh and liberating. They do however have a long tradition within the history of avant-garde and experimental art education. With their agonist emphasis on non-specialization, commitment to non-art constituencies (or anti-autonomy) and to anti-hierarchical decision-making processes, they most purely embody the paradoxical injunction for modern and contemporary art "to undo itself through its own products, and then stitch itself back together differently," as Charles Esche once astutely put it.<sup>iii</sup> It is the need to free oneself from conventions in order to constitute one's own origin. Back to zero, *tabula rasa*. Every time, again and again.

'The tradition of the new' in Rosenberg's expression has however now famously been questioned not only because of its failure to be dangerous to the system of economic class domination it often sought to overthrow (the so-called "failed avant-garde project") but because of the problematic gender and race underpinnings of many of its movements as well as their historiography.<sup>iv</sup> Indeed, as Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker showed in their groundbreaking study *Old Mistresses* women artists were erased from the history of modern art in what seemed to be a circumstantial –if not concerted—effort to purge its pages from their influence.

This also holds true for the art educational institutions that historically often went along with them such as the Bauhaus and the Black Mountain College for instance. Being “modern” in their rejection of artistic tradition, their progressive attitude towards aesthetics, questions of social class and education, wasn’t extensive to gender politics. Indeed, their policies were far from being forward-looking in that regard. The Bauhaus relegated women to workshops deemed “womanly” enough such as weaving while actually still upholding a policy that expressed a traditional hierarchy between craft and art (giving less value to the former).<sup>v</sup> The Black Mountain College also failed to give neither title nor compensation to the women –and particularly faculty wives—who were active in many positions within its educational programs, despite the increasing recognition of women as equal of men in all areas of culture and life at the time (Black Mountain College was active from 1933 until 1957).<sup>vi</sup> In other words, working towards “the revolution” in art and education clearly didn’t always mean progress on all fronts. In fact, questions of class overshadowed gender ones, as they arguably still do so today.

The Bauhaus and Black Mountain College are of course historical examples, and one might dispute their relevance in the 21st century. Alas, they remain examples of innovative educational practice and still exert a powerful influence on contemporary practitioners searching for meaningful precedents in the field of radical art education. This, in itself, isn’t much of a problem, if it wasn’t for the fact that most of those who claim their legacy almost never address its problematic gender history. By doing so, they prevent themselves from addressing the issue in the present and fail to tackle the problem of gender in their own projects.

Despite the achievements of feminism and in light of its recent backlash, there is a very clear need to discuss gender again. Only in that manner can change be effected. As Foucault once stated: ““If we seek to advance right away a profile or a formula of the future of society without thoroughly criticizing all forms of political power that exercise their power within society, we run the risk of letting them be reproduced even in the case of the noble and apparently pure forms such as anarcho-syndicalism” –a tradition from which the DAD can be said to stem ideologically.<sup>vii</sup> It is therefore imperative to thematise gender to prevent its processes of subordination and exclusion to perpetuate themselves. Specially, when the goal is to create a “free society,” or when a art educational program presupposes a form of freedom from all conventions.

Forms of gender oppression might not be as conspicuous as they used to be though, but inequality still very much persists.<sup>viii</sup> Women have entered the work force, but they still earn less and are less likely to reach the top in their profession. The sad reality is that art, when identified as being made by a woman, becomes less likely to be

exhibited, reviewed<sup>ix</sup> or to cost as much money.<sup>x</sup> Female artists, who constitute a majority of art graduates, face glass ceilings at every stage of their career upon finishing their education.<sup>xi</sup>

But gender as a structure of oppression is also embedded in tiny daily routines and interactions. And acquiescence to and accommodation of gender power dynamics is no more than the internalization of the current gender power structure. The caring attitude, for instance, that many women have learned to identify with themselves –and that which is wonderful and praiseworthy in itself—becomes a gendered feature when it isn't enacted by everyone.

So to return to the initial question at the core of the Magma festival "What is it we are part of?" I would suggest it is, in potency, a community that not only in words but also in actions constitutes the community of the future –one that has learned to permanently 'unsettle' itself by neutralizing the ways in which inequality reproduces itself daily. In other words, I would say, let's take care of each other, in order to be dangerous together!

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<sup>i</sup> Hito Steyerl, "The Institution of Critique," *The European Institution for* [http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/steyerl/en/base\\_edit](http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/steyerl/en/base_edit), accessed May 9, 2019.

<sup>ii</sup> Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* 44, 1 (2005): 286.

<sup>iii</sup> Charles Esche, "Start with a Table..." in Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson (eds.), *Curating and the Educational Turn* (London: Open Editions, 2010), pp. 311-312.

<sup>iv</sup> Matei Călinescu, 'The Crisis of Avant-garde's Concept in the 1960s', in: *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitch, Postmodernism*, 1987 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 119-124.

<sup>v</sup> Anja Baumhof, *The Gendered World of the Bauhaus* (Bern: Peter Lang GmbH, Internationaler Verlag Der Wissenschaften, 2001).

<sup>vi</sup> "Politics of Gender" in *Politics at Black Mountain College: Digital Exhibition: A Supplement to the Exhibition at Black Mountain College Museum +Arts Center, on Show February 1 – May 18, 2019*, <http://www.blackmountaincollege.org/politicsdigitalportal/>, accessed May 9, 2019.

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vii *Human Nature: Justice versus Power: Noam Chomsky Debates with Michel Foucault*, 1971, <https://chomsky.info/1971xxxx/>, accessed May 9, 2019.

viii Cecilia L. Ridgeway, *Framed by Gender* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

ix Pauwke Berkers, Marc Verboord and Frank Weij, ““The critics (still) don’t write enough about women artists”: Gender inequality in the newspaper coverage of arts and culture in France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States, 1955-2005,” *Gender & Society*, Vol. 30, No. 3, June (2016): pp. 515-539.

x Hannah Ghorashi, “Inequality endures: The price of being a female artist in 2015,” *ArtNews*. December 30, 2015, <http://www.artnews.com/2015/12/30/women-art-status-in-2015/> accessed November 10, 2017.

xi Julia Halperin, “The 4 glass ceilings: How women artists get stiffed at every stage of their careers,” *Artnet News*, December 15, 2017. <https://news.artnet.com/market/art-market-study-1179317> accessed January 9, 2018.