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The search for non-existent rules

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In a recent lecture to the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO), Koen Brams, then director of the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht, vigorously opposed any form of formatting research by artists. The immediate stimulus for his attack was the invitation of the NVAO which referred to ‘research (skills)/theory’. According to Brams, equating these terms showed what was wrong with the notion of research in the arts and what lies hidden behind programmes called artistic research. Let us leave the question of whether formatting research is the only solution for a moment (the output of the Jan van Eyck Academie shows that there is no getting around formatting) and return to it later. Let us first look at the relation between research and theory in order to understand the role that theory can play in art education.

To start with, I would like to examine the practice of teaching theory at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie at the moment. There are two elements that are specific to it. In the last few years certain divisions in the teaching of theory have been done away with, while others have been applied or reinforced. The separation between philosophy and art history that was an official part of the curriculum has been abolished. Within that model, first of all art history afforded a general view of the development of art – usually only in its Western variant – and then the rest of the course went on to offer the visual framework for the production of the students. The art history tutor presented the current state of affairs in art and indicated the prior history of the ideas and concepts of the students because that context was considered essential for the weighing up of the quality of the students’ own visual production. Teaching in philosophy laid the foundation for the development of an independent form of thinking by relating the student’s views and presuppositions about art and artistry to notions deriving from the history of philosophy. This division was based on the traditional breakdown into disciplines that is still to be found in the universities. But there too it is some time since they became aware that the history of art is an empty summing up of developments in form unless it is related to a history of thought, while reflection on aesthetics that has an insufficient knowledge of the forms that art has assumed over the years is like a pretentious bubble of air that follows the direction of the prevailing wind. The combination of philosophy and art history that is in use today in the Rietveld Academie is based on this awareness. As a consequence, the Academie often tries to find theory tutors who are capable of dealing with this interconnection in their teaching – in short, theory tutors who tend to be drawn more from such new disciplines as Visual Culture and Cultural Analysis or are at least familiar with them.

This connection between two domains that used to be separated is also in line with the bachelor in art education because it is attuned to a different way of teaching theory. While until a few years ago the emphasis was on transferring knowledge by talking and showing, it is now much more a question of learning a practice, a way of acting. Projecting endless series of slides with examples from the more recent or less recent history of art and lecturing on important notions from crucial moments in the development of thought have been replaced by an active appropriation of images and ideas. Tutors no longer have a pile of books with them that they cheerfully toss into the air in the hope that the self-aware and eager student will catch them, but read significant parts of these books with them and discuss them in relation to art and even in relation to the students’ own work. In this

way they make it clear that what counts is not just what is written in that text, but also what is done with it and thus what you might be able to do with it.

To understand why this breaking down of divisions is so well attuned to the prevailing form of art education, but also to realise what dangers it entails, it is worth going slightly further into the way in which art and design are taught at the Rietveld Academie. As you probably know, it is only partly a question of learning certain skills; what really counts is to develop your own concepts in the field of art and design. The basis for an independent attitude on the part of the artist or designer is laid right from the start and develops during the four-year course to become an individual practice. The academy trains designers who turn every commission around six times to get it as they want it, and artists who are capable of profiling their unruliness. This model, however, requires students to have the capacity to draw up the rules that their work must satisfy themselves. Not only or not even what a client expects, nor what the world of art wants at that moment, but the special translation that the student gives it, is the touchstone for judging the quality of the results. This is based on the assumption that the core of the personality of the artist or designer can emerge in the path that is chosen and the steps that are taken along it. In other words, students at the Rietveld Academie are assessed not so much for how their work relates to an exemplary artistic or design practice, but above all for the consequences of a set of rules that they have chosen themselves. That assessment targets both the choice of the rules and the consequence of their implementation.

This is no easy course to follow, because it requires students to choose their own path in complete freedom, while in practice they still have relatively little idea of what that freedom can mean. Moreover, the reaction of the tutors shows that in practice not all freedom is equally free and that there is an implicit but nevertheless presupposed ideal. There is thus a permanent tension both in the teaching and in the assessment of the results between choosing non-conventional rules and the pitfall of when the non-conventional itself becomes a rule.

That tension can be productive, but it can also have a paralyzing effect. It must be properly channelled by experienced tutors who are themselves good designers or artists who recognise and acknowledge the dilemma. But the tension can also be put to positive use with the aid of theories, philosophies and artistic and design practices that show that the non-conventional rules go back to ideas and assumptions that may lead in different directions, and that the same rules have led to completely different forms in the more recent or less recent past. In other words, it is precisely the combination of theory and practice, the possible link between philosophy and art history, that can offer a student the background against which the self-chosen rules can be profiled.

The fact that precisely that combination of philosophy and examples from the history of art forms a good layer of humus to cultivate non-conventionality is connected with the specific character of theory and the way in which that finds expression in art teaching at the Rietveld Academie. It is no great secret that art teaching in the Netherlands has been traditionally plagued by a certain mistrust of the printed word, especially when that word seems to be saying something complex about the world in a way that is difficult to follow. Reading such texts is supposed to be a distraction from developing one's own artistic signature, and the student, often plagued by dyslexia, is taken to waste valuable time in getting tangled up in theory – dogmas that would mean the death of the student's artistic inspiration. Theory and philosophy, it is argued, should only be provided to a limited extent by experienced tutors who would immediately be able to explain the value of the text in question for art. On this view, which has lost most of its following by now, too much theory and too much time for theory only lead to hopelessly getting lost in the forest of ponderous truth, and would inevitably lead to mere illustrations of dimly grasped ideas. There is no denying, it is true, that an overdose of rhizomes regularly leads to well-intentioned but poorly understood representations of root systems, but that need not be a problem. To study is to make mistakes, and precisely such a direct illustration of a complex theory indicates that it is not just a question of acquiring theoretical notions, but above all of learning how to handle them as well. The compelling character that texts may have, the weight of the dogma that they seem to bear, is not avoided by only making them accessible indirectly through a tutor. In fact, as in the case of sacred texts, their claim to truth actually seems to

be reinforced by this mediation. The idea that the theory is too complex underestimates both the ability of the students to understand and the capacity to be able to speak intelligibly about the most important texts. Students can appropriate a text themselves just as they can and must go in search of works of art from the present and the past to which they must or want to relate. And that search is called research.

At this point it is important to mention another division that has been abolished in the teaching of theory at the Rietveld Academie today: the separation between theory and practice. It has been accepted for a long time by now that every practice has its burden of theory, in other words, every artistic practice that is learnt is shaped in advance by ideas about artistry, artistic practices, good design, techniques, artists' strategies, genuine and non-genuine, authenticity and autonomy, in short, all those things that crop up implicitly or explicitly in the course of training to become a designer or artist. A far less widely accepted notion, however, is that all theory rests on practice. All philosophy, art theory, cultural analysis or whatever is based on a way of looking, acting and living from which it emerges, and time and again, as the idea is materialised and the theory is put into practice, this leads to forms of perception and action. In art education, of course, this is mainly about theory that touches the domain of art, as an inspiration or background not only of the masterpieces that surround us, but also of the new and not yet formulated artistic practice that we want to teach the students. That is why we have chosen to teach theory and art history no longer in strictly separated lessons, a discursive exercise that is only connected with the production of art in a very indirect way, but as an integral part of learning the practice of an artist or designer. It is not always easy, however, to find the right way of giving form to this choice. For instance, groups of students are supervised by a practice tutor and a theory tutor who are both present at the same moment.

Theory is a search, it is about raising possible ways of thinking about the world and human existence. A philosophy is a reality that has been thrown up, a possible reality, just as every work of art is a proposition and a representation of a possible but different reality. It is at their meeting point that the students' search begins to find the way in which they have to formulate the rules that will govern their propositions or representations. It is in that combination of theory and practice that the intuitive research begins that a student must learn to recognise and trust in order to develop it into his or her own idiosyncrasy. Both theory teaching and practical teaching focus on assisting this search; they provide material and reflection, they teach how to acquire skill in finding one's way in the forest of truths, and they show that it is a matter of hypotheses that can be accepted or rejected, but can also be converted into new hypotheses in practice.

This model has its reverse side. Drawing up your own rules through research in theory and practice only has a chance of succeeding if students know how to search. A search based on nothing but a vague feeling, a hidden intuition, is a risky business. It is like sending a student into a cave that is much too big with a lantern that is much too small; either they will get terribly lost, or they will cling to phantoms that seem familiar. Even intuition, the almost corporeal form of knowledge, as Carlo Ginzburg describes it in his text *Traces*, has to be trained. A basis of recognition and exploration has to be able to emerge – recognition by offering a rudimentary general view of art and philosophy, exploration by confronting students with texts, ideas, concepts and images that usually fall outside their radar. In this way the bachelor's course offers a permanent exercise in exploration, a training in searching for traces. For precisely because the academy expects its students to be able to make their own plans and choose their own path, they need constant practice in making choices if they are to be choices that are not based on some indeterminate inner feeling – that is the engine that keeps the thing going, but it does not steer it – but on all that art and philosophy have to offer. That exercise is not swimming on land: exploring can only be learnt by doing it. It is a question of making things and designing projects on the basis of reading, looking, talking, searching, trying out, failing and trying again. The final examination is in the end the proof that a student can undertake that search on his or her own initiative. That proof is provided by a graduation work consisting of a discursive component, in which the exploration of theory, philosophy and art history is clearly explained, and a practical component in which the exploration assumes the form of a work of art or design.

The master's course and Ph.D. curriculum continue along the same path. In the master's course the exploration

is already much more targeted, the students have a better idea of what they are looking for. The practice of master's course in art education shows that it is difficult to strike a balance between project and production, between research and output. Until recently the common practice of the Sandberg Instituut, which provides the master's courses of the Rietveld Academie, was to stimulate participants as much as possible to produce for specific situations. By placing themselves in a situation in which something was expected of them and they were supposed to come up with something, it was assumed that the students would be able to discover what they wanted to make. The hard confrontation would triumph over pointless doubt and strengthen intuition. That has led to a number of generations of artists who are able to produce in all circumstances, who seldom get cold feet, and who often manage to come up with surprising results. At the same time they are often artists who display a certain lack of depth and reflection, artists whose capacity to make is combined with an inability to formulate.

The new tendency to work in the form of projects in the master's courses entails pointing practice in a very different direction. Production is now no longer driven by the situation, but by a theme. The field of potential production is not defined by a site or an occasion, but it is discursively described as a series of starting points or considerations, a way of looking or of working. There is the risk that the training model will turn into its diametrical opposite. Whereas in the past the surprise of the work sometimes seemed to be rather too temporary or too thin, through the grounding of the work that is done in the projects now there is the risk of a lack of surprise. I believe that the right balance between these approaches has to be found at the point where research and theory meet. Only by making it clear to students that research plays a role in the production of art in a number of different ways, and that these different ways of production are connected with the strategy with which the work of art is placed in the field of art, can we get the students to learn to make decisions on their own about the path to follow. At the moment there seems to be too much of an almost arbitrary system that can and must be used for his or her own devices by the student. The format is taboo, the terrifying idea that it has proved to be for Koen Brams. But the supposition that research can be given shape without any model at all is as naïve as the idea that art is reinvented each time in absolute freedom. Just as the format, the form of the research, guarantees its dissemination and recognition, art too has certain models that promote acceptance and circulation at particular times and in particular circuits. The strength of an artist lies not only in producing work, but also in applying the right strategies to ensure that his or her work produces an effect. Those strategies may form the basis of the research models that are passed on to the up and coming artist. After they have learnt during the bachelor's course that theory can contribute to the creation of the work, the exploration of the hypothesis that backs up the hypothesis of the work of art, in the master's course they can further explore the relevance of theory and research for their own practice in relation to the character of that work and their own talent, but by all means also in relation to the strategy that seems the most appropriate for the dissemination of that work. In other words, finding one's own path during the master's course must be combined with a weighing up of the way in which research and theory can be used and deployed. Roughly speaking, three models are available for that: research that serves above all to further the practice; research in which theory plays a role alongside the practice; and research in which theory and practice are jointly elaborated.

Research, theory, art: none of them is a clearly definable entity that can be clearly demarcated from the rest. Every artist conducts research, every artistic practice is fraught with theory, every use of theory presupposes a practice. That is why it is entirely pointless to apply all kinds of strict definitions here. Theory and research are inextricably connected with the production of art. During the bachelor's course they must be learnt as an essential part of practice. The question of how they can best be employed to do justice to both the talent of the student and the potential of the student's work must be the focus of the teaching of theory, research and practice in the master's course.

This text is from the book:

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