Society

If wdka didn't exist

17 Letters from dystopian and utopian futures of arts education

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(Our letters pay homage to the 1890 novel *News from Nowhere* by William Morris, a major figure in the 19th century British Arts and Crafts movement. Morris' novel tells the story of a protagonist who wakes up in a better society [the literal "nowhere" of his book title when "utopia" is translated from Greek into English] and who reciprocally informs the future people about the misery from where he came. Our first letter is written from a dystopian, the second from a utopian future of arts education in 2030.)

Letter 1

Picture: from the Instagram account wdkamemes

Rotterdam, October 1st, 2030

Dear G.,

You asked me to tell you about the future of arts, design and art education, since you live in the year 2020 and doubt whether you should study at an art school. I would – tentatively, and within the limitations of my knowledge and competence – argue that few areas of society and labor have changed as much as this one.

In the 2020s, the field of the arts, design and creative professions underwent major paradigm shifts[1]>>:

- accelerated by economic crises and policy changes, a shift from the paradigm "art and culture" to the paradigm "creative industries" had already occurred in the 2010s, but took on new meaning in the Covid-19 crisis;
- a failure of both traditional art markets and design industries to provide sufficient employment for art school graduates;
- economic shrinkage and deprofessionalization of commercial creative work through large Internet platforms;
- a cultural legitimacy crisis of the Western concepts of arts and design.

In between the crises of 2008 and 2020

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation of the arts had been precarious. In the Netherlands, a policy shift from "arts and culture" to "creative industries" had occurred in the early 2010s, under the first Rutte cabinet, in line with previous developments in Great Britain and elsewhere in Europe.[2]>> Among others, it meant a fundamental reorganization of funding structures and a shift from public art funding to "creative entrepreneurship".[3]>> This historically coincided with the financial crisis of 2008/2009 in which the Dutch art market (that already had been weakly developed in comparison to other Western countries) shrunk substantially. Among others, large Dutch companies sold or reduced their art collections and did not fully resume art sponsorship after the crisis.[4]>>

Commissions and work opportunities for art in the public space shrank, too, after the Dutch state had reduced its own public building projects by

delegating more real estate development to the private market. This, in turn, reduced the number of mandatory art commissions for public buildings (under the Dutch "percentageregeling" of 1951).[5]>> The regional "Centra voor Beeldende Kunst" (CBK), created as support infrastructures for local artists after the end of the generous income subsidy for Dutch artists (BKR) in 1987, shrank as well and partly shut down after 2010 – which further decreased resources and income opportunities for studio artists.

There is, to my knowledge, no research on how many artists in the Netherlands could live, fully or mostly, from art market sales. But based on art market rankings (such as those of the website Artfacts.net) and the low number of galleries and art fairs in the country, their number can be assumed to be negligible (i.e., one that cannot even be expressed in a percentage) in relation to the estimated 344,100 people working in the Dutch creative sector in 2019, and even in relation to the 127,600 people working in its subset of art and cultural heritage.[6]>>

The crisis of 2008 had reshaped the commercial landscape of Dutch design, too. Large design companies (such as Total Design and Studio Dumbar) went out of business or shrank to a fraction of their previous size. Most designers continued to work as self-employed creatives ("zzp'ers").[7]>> This was helped by technological developments of the early 2000s which allowed professional content creation on home computers and laptops and thus ended the necessity of studio facilities for, among others, graphic design and video postproduction.

The definition of creative industries, which had its historical origins in 1990s British music, film, television, fashion, architecture, advertising and design industries, underwent a shift, and became structurally problematic after the Internet and social media had toppled traditional content industries. Between 2000 and 2020, the "Big Five" of Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Amazon and Apple had largely replaced or marginalized older media industries and brought, for the most part, a paradigm shift from (pre-digital) media companies as content producers to (digital) companies as platform providers for content sharing (such as Google/YouTube and Facebook/Instagram). This shrank the market for classical commissioned work and removed professional divides between creative producers and consumers.

Already in 2020, advertising, for example, was mostly a matter of algorithmically placed messages, and involved creative work (photography, animation, illustration, graphic design, filmmaking) to a much lesser extent than television and magazine advertising of the past. On top of that, creative production became increasingly outsourced to self-made social media influencers (as such YouTube and Instagram personalities) most of whom had no professional art or design education.[8]>>

As a result of these developments, the studio/gallery artist and the designer working in a design bureau were no longer the norm for creative work in 2020, and thus no longer the professional education paradigm of the Willem de Kooning Academy.[9]>> The numbers of creatives working in these traditional ways further shrank in the Covid-19 pandemic, which also meant the end of shared studio buildings and designers' co-working spaces after 2020.

The paradigm shifts and disruptions were not only of an economic nature. In the 2020s, a cultural legitimacy crisis of "art" and "design" as taught at Dutch and other Western art schools and represented by arts and cultural institutions, became clearly visible and openly debated. There was no doubt that the canon, historical references, and visual languages taught at Western art schools were deeply Eurocentric.[10]>> "Dutch Design", for example, mostly continued Western European modernist traditions and visual languages established in the 1920s and 1960s, along with Western modernism's implicit claim of cultural universality. The same was true for "contemporary art" as a field whose meaning had narrowed down, in the 2000s, from a blanket description of current (fine) art to that of a particular discourse and style in art following Western post-war minimalism and conceptual art.[11]>>

In a globalized world, and in a multicultural country such as the Netherlands and a city with a non-white population majority such as Rotterdam, these discourses no longer worked, and led to a legitimacy crisis of cultural institutions.[12]>> The established notions of art and design turned out to be as problematic as, for example, the hypothetical assumption that the Western classical music tradition represents "music" in general, and that going to a music venue, turning on the radio or studying music at a conservatoire means to hear or practice only this type of music.

Conversely, the contemporary artists with the strongest impact on public debates in the Netherlands were People of Color: The artist Quinsy Gario

and the poet Jerry Afriyie began "Zwarte Piet Is Racisme" ("Black Pete Is Racism") in 2011 as an art project, a detail that until today is little known even in the Netherlands.[13]>> The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in Amsterdam and Rotterdam were organized by contemporary artists, in Rotterdam by the spoken word artist Carina Fernandes from the project *Verbalism*, Malique Mohamud from the art collective Concrete Blossom (and research fellow at the Rotterdam-based design, architecture and digital culture institute Het Nieuwe Instituut) and the theater maker Elvin Rigters; in Amsterdam by Mitchell Esajas from the art project The Black Archives (and fellow of the Utrecht-based contemporary art institute BAK). Rigters also acted as the speaker of the Black Lives Matter delegation that met with prime minister Mark Rutte in the same year.

The new state of the arts

By clinging to its status quo, Western arts education increasingly operated on the basis of exclusiveness instead of inclusion, and with a principle of limiting its resources instead of reaching out. This had already been its default modus operandi and comfort zone, since admission to arts education is traditionally selective[14]>> and a default work mode for both artists and art school-trained designers is to produce exclusive products (such as designer label fashion versus mass-market fashion).[15]>> "Fine art", the standard name for (non-design contemporary) art study programs, describes this exclusivity even literally. Although there had been many attempts within Western modern and contemporary art to break with exclusivity – from Bauhaus' industrial design to public street performances, inexpensive artists' books and freely accessible Internet art, to name only a few – the production of collectible luxury objects eventually prevailed and led to a boom of the global art market before the Covid-19 pandemic, with the leading Gagosian Gallery running 16 branches on three continents and the Art Basel fair extending to Miami and Hong Kong.[16]>>

These markets operate with a star artist system and provide little opportunity to Dutch art school graduates. In 2020, the only Dutch artist – ranked 98 – in Artfacts.net's art market top 100 of living artists was the South African-born Marlene Dumas.[17]>> Among young-generation artists who succeeded on the art market, the graduates of a few world-leading schools (such as the Yale School of Art) dominated.[18]>>

After the Covid-19 crisis, the Dutch government intervened to make Dutch fine art education both more exclusive and art market-oriented, after the capacity of fine art programs had already been reduced under the first two coalition governments of prime minister Mark Rutte in the 2010s. In 2024, the Ministry of Education initiated a roll-back of all degree-awarding Dutch art schools to the arts and crafts trade schools they originally were, and reinstated the Rijksacademie as a degree-awarding fine art school at university ("WO") level. Its budget was increased to hire international star artists as professors. This at least resulted in a more honest system than the old one, in which the schools sold their students unrealistic hopes of "making it" in the system of Art Basel and Gagosian Gallery.

In his 2016 book *Siegerkunst* (*Winner Art*), the German art historian Wolfgang Ullrich had analyzed how this system, and art ownership, was dominated by oligarchs and billionaire collectors for many of whom collecting art is no different to collecting vintage wines or cars, and who trade artworks as speculative assets on a market that lacks the regulation of other financial markets.[19]>> Critics pointed out – and the Hollywood action movie *Tenet* quite accurately depicted – how, in the years before Covid-19, much of this art was not even on display anywhere, but stored in tax-free underground airport depots.[20]>> The boom of the art market had occurred in sync with post-Cold War economic growth, increasingly uneven distribution of property and wealth[21]>> and the emergence of new oligarch and billionaire classes on all continents. The sociologists Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre argued that art collection had become a vital part of those 21st century "enrichment societies".[22]>>

The Covid-19 pandemic of the 2020s and the economic, political and social disruption caused by global climate change intensified this social divide. It turned the world – including the former Western welfare states – into societies divided into (sub)proletarian and oligarch classes. The contemporary art market expanded even further to cater to the latter while public arts budgets shrank to irrelevance. Artists were divided into a few winners and many losers.[23]>> In this game, Dutch art schools and the Willem de Kooning Academy had no future.

In the first half of the 2020s, the Netherlands still tried to maintain its tradition of keeping contemporary arts accessible to a larger public and foster contemporary design and architecture through public commissions. This ended, however, along with a permanent crisis of the EU, the collapse of

the remains of the post-World War II welfare system, and the political party "Forum voor Democratie" entering a national coalition government. Its leader became Minister of Education and Culture. Following the models of Poland and Hungary, he pushed his party agenda of replacing contemporary with historicist art, design and architecture.[24]>>

Appreciation of the arts, whether historical or contemporary, had become the equivalent of appreciation of Western classical music, and catered to an educated, mostly white European audience. This had already happened in the years before the radical policy changes. While contemporary art and design were still publicly accessible in that time, its institutions had failed to include new audiences. Policymakers had even turned art, design and creative industries into means of exclusion by utilizing them to attract "desired" higher-income populations to cities at the expense of their resident lower classes.[25]>>

After 2020, austerity politics and pandemic control led to a decline of the public art sector to only a handful of larger national museums. In order to better appeal to mainstream audiences and avoid political conflict, they became pure cultural heritage institutions and largely ceased work with contemporary artists and designers.

After having lost their fine art departments, the former art schools ended up merging with industrial design programs of larger Universities of Applied Science. Others opted for the opposite strategy and became more exclusive schools financed mainly by students' tuition fees. This was helped by the large-scale move to online education during the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on recruiting more international students who now could follow curricula through distance learning.

Creative upper, middle and working classes

Before the pandemic, a precedent had existed in university humanities. Since the 1990s, critical theory could – in often blatant contradiction to its socio-political message – best be studied at expensive private universities such as New York University (NYU) which, by 2020, had expanded into more than a dozen franchises on all continents.[26]>> In the first years of the Corona crisis, the switch to online education allowed Dutch art schools to increase and diversify the number of teachers, by inviting artists, practitioners and thinkers from outside the Netherlands and Europe who otherwise would

not have been able to come to the country or work in it. This also brought previously underrepresented voices into the curriculum. But eventually, the competition of highly funded, globally operating private schools left Dutch public schools in a situation where they could no longer afford high-profile lecturer fees. Instead, remote teaching gradually turned art school education into a precarious gig economy (more on this later).

U.S. American university humanities and their critical theory departments of the early 2000s became a role model for research-oriented art schools after Covid-19: While making strong pledges for inclusion and canon revision, and attracting a geographically diverse student body, these schools mostly ended up having students from well-to-do families who could afford the study (both the tuition and the insecure post-graduation career prospects). The term "fine art" thus became a self-fulfilling prophecy of a creative upper class, or using the terminology of the economist Thomas Piketty: rentier class.[27]>> Colloquially, these schools became known as "trustafarian schools", based on the American portmanteau colloquialism of "trust fund kid" (a person with wealthy parents receiving a regular allowance from them) and "rastafarian" (as a general moniker of an alternative lifestyle). This by itself was not a new phenomenon, since in the 20th century, a number of prominent thinkers and artists had come from wealthy families and did not need to work for money, such as the founder of critical theory Theodor W. Adorno, the artist Marcel Duchamp and the literary writer William S. Burroughs.

The establishment of artistic research schools, often in collaboration with universities, conversely created a new middle class of artistic practitioners. In fact, this had already been the case before the Covid-19 crisis in countries where artistic research was more firmly established and institutionalized (such as Finland, Sweden and Norway). These schools provided project-based, in some cases also tenured institutional employment in artistic research labs and transdisciplinary research programs. In this niche, and protected from the larger shakeups of the contemporary art system and of art education, artistic research ended up becoming an art system of its own; a laboratory art that was largely disconnected from non-academic art practices, social engagement and quotidian visual culture.[28]>>

Precedents for this exist in the fields of "Art-Science" (established in the late 1960s) and in electronic literature (i.e., literary writing that experiments with digital media technology, established in the 1990s).[29]>> These art forms

typically operated with their own, specific historical canons. Pre-Covid-19 examples included artist's residencies at research institutes such as CERN in Switzerland and the Max Planck Institute in Germany, institutes such as the German new media arts center ZKM and the Austrian Ars Electronica Futurelab, and entire genres of research lab-based art such as interactive installation art, Bio Art and what has been known, since 2006, under the moniker STEAM ("Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Mathematics", as an extension of STEM disciplines). In all of them, the white cube paradigm got replaced by a white coat paradigm.[30]>> Initial enthusiasm about embracing these art forms for school education waned in the later 2020s when it became clear how in most cases, the role of artists and designers in those environments remained limited to being guests, observers and visualizers, but not actually researchers.[31]>>

Before the Corona crisis, research lab art practices had struggled with major acceptance problems within the Western contemporary art discourse and curatorship, since they were often considered creative engineering rather than contemporary art.[32]>> These practices were, however, better accepted within design,[33]>> and, since the early 2000s, in the institutional contemporary art systems of East Asian countries such as the People's Republic of China and Taiwan.[34]>> This difference in acceptance also had to do with a cultural difference: In the West, art, craft and design had become separate disciplines after the Renaissance, while this differentiation does traditionally not exist in other cultures. In Asian countries, there was thus no comparative systemic pressure to keep these disciplines 'pure', respectively no historical reason for treating art as an 'autonomous' domain.

The Covid-19 crisis accelerated the ongoing shift of political and economic power, and of cultural hegemony, from Western countries to East Asia. Through this shift, the STEAM paradigm became a global mainstream in the later 2020s and was re-imported from East Asia to Europe. For art curators and art schools, STEAM also provided a loophole for experimental arts and design practices under the neo-historicist governmental cultural policy. STEAM curricula, however, further marginalized the former art schools, since Technical Universities were better equipped to teach them and had already laid the respective groundwork before the crisis.[35]>>

Next to the fine arts upper class and the research lab middle class, work in the commercial creative industries ended up defining the creative working class. This development had already begun before the Covid-19 crisis but

accelerated in its course. After its initial transformation from company employment to freelance work in the early 2010s, creative industries work transformed again in the 2020s; this time, from classical work commissions to the so-called "gig economy" of online labor platforms.[36]>> Fiverr, a prominent and economically growing creative labor platform even before the Covid-19 crisis,[37]>> became the standard job marketplace for commercial creative work in the 2020s, and changed creative professions in the same way Uber had changed the taxi business and Airbnb the hotel business. Designers no longer needed to run their own companies and homepages but were only reachable through their Fiverr accounts. Fiverr, which has been running since 2010, functions as an open marketplace for job commissions such as graphic design (including logo and corporate identity design), illustration, web design, photo editing, video production and postproduction, and music recording. All communication and payment between clients and designers is done via the website, and all designers registered on it can respond to a job request with their offer.

In March 2020, the Canadian video advertising producer and vlogger Daniel Schiffer (who, at that time, had more than one million YouTube subscribers) made a Fiverr-sponsored experiment in which he looked, on the platform, for a video editor of a restaurant commercial he had shot. He ended up hiring ten different editors to independently edit their own version of the commercial. Each of them charged between $25 and $500 for the fully completed job (which included editing, adding a soundtrack and delivering the completed video).[38]>> While $500 would be the norm for such a work assignment done by a (still inexpensive, local) professional in Western countries, the editors who worked for $25, $35, $75 and $85 respectively, delivered professional results, too.

In other words, Fiverr opened up the creative industries to a global competition in the same way traditional Western industries had been exposed to global competition in the decades before. Commercial design work could now be done much cheaper by creatives living in low-wage/weak-currency countries or by upstart creatives in high-wage countries who use price dumping to establish themselves in the market. As a result, remote work platforms like Fiverr and Amazon Mechanical Turk drove an economic race to the bottom for creative labor.[39]>>

Before Covid-19, these platforms were still controversial within the creative

industries.**[40]**>> During and after the crisis, the platforms simply replaced the traditional creative industries in the same way streaming platforms like Netflix had replaced movie theaters and YouTube and Spotify older television and music industries; in all cases, with drastically reduced revenue for creatives.**[41]**>> The paradigm shift to platforms like Fiverr was further helped by the fact that pandemic social distancing had changed the majority of commercial design jobs (such as identity design, exhibition design, editorial design, and audiovisual design) from physical end-products to digital media design.

With the perspective of low-paid gig economy work, prospective commercial designers and creatives simply decided against studying above vocational school level (such as "MBO/Grafisch Lyceum" in the Netherlands). Those with higher ambitions pursued university-level IT and business studies to become creators *of* such platforms rather than creatives working *on* them.

The ultimate doom scenario

I could sum up the dystopian state of art and design education in 2030 with only two words: obsolescence and irrelevance.

Looking back, both had their roots in exclusion:

- exclusion on an economic level; because art markets, the public art and education sector and the commercial creative industries failed to provide sufficient and financially viable employment. This was due to exclusiveness of access (to the art market) and resources (in public and educational art infrastructures), and due to the race-to-the-bottom effects of globalized gig and platform economies (in the creative industries);
- exclusion through exclusiveness, after "boutique schools" for fine art and artistic research were only affordable for privileged student populations; which ultimately did not work for public schools in a globalized, post-pandemic online competition with better-funded private universities;
- exclusion through self-obsoletion, among others after STEAM curricula became mainstream in Technical Universities;
- exclusion on a social and cultural level, after having clung to the 20th century Western concepts of "contemporary art" and "(Dutch) design"; concepts that not only failed to include other experiences and cultures, but most importantly excluded whole new generations of bi- and intercultural people whose practice transgressed the traditional categories of art and

design, performing and visual arts, arts and activism and art and small businesses. Their practices were already shaping public debates and new artistic developments during the Covid-19 crisis but were not sufficiently recognized and accommodated because they did not fit existing art school curricula.

These failures of inclusion accumulated and ended up not only obsoleting the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam, but most of higher art and design education institutes in the Netherlands and in Europe. The few art schools that survived became cultural heritage institutions, with drastically reduced societal relevance.

I am writing this from a quantum universe where multiple futures coexist. So, this is only one history of many.

Love,

Florian

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Letter 2

Picture: from the Instagram account wdkamemes

Rotterdam, October 1st, 2030

My dearest G,

I am writing to you to say that I made it. I write to you ten years into the future. I can't believe we managed to pull it off. I am thinking about all the discussions within our research group, assembled to work on the technical possibilities and societal consequences of time travel, not to mention conversations about who would be the test subject to undertake such a journey. In the end, the test subject was you. I mean me. Now that you, I, am here, please be mindful of the conditions established by our research group:

1. Time travel is, technically and ethically, a complicated endeavor. Whatever insight or new information is gleaned from the future might have unforeseen societal effects in the present, even if shared with the best of intentions. For this reason, you will have your memory completely erased upon your return.
2. You are not to bring back any recordings or any form of documentation from the journey.
3. You are prohibited from telling anybody in the future that you are a time traveler.
4. Upon your return, you are prohibited from speaking about your journey to

anybody outside of the research group.

Note: Artist researchers working in the research group have been looking at the possibilities of encoding information gleaned from time travel into different writing genres. Artist researchers have summarized that research and policy documents have the least suitable writing styles. The researchers made recommendations for speculative fiction and poetry as the most promising formats. Poetry and speculative fiction can be indispensable containers of encoded languages as they offer the potential to linger within the liminal space between fact and fiction, with possible broad, transgenerational outreach.[42]>> *This trip will focus solely on time travel's technical possibilities.*

A disclaimer: I am not breaking the rules. This letter will stay in the future. I will write down what I have seen and experienced on three sheets of paper, double sided, and then hide it somewhere in the building of the Willem de Kooning Academy (WdKA). Walking around the outside of the academy, I have found a small gap in the wall – a space between a couple of bricks where the mortar is missing – on the east side of the building, I will fold the paper very tightly and cram it deep into the crack in the wall. There is little chance that you, or anybody else for that matter, will ever find it. It suffices to know that it is there.

The spatial constraints of my selected hiding spot mean that I have had to limit some of my observations about the future to a few comments on the current restructuring of the academy. I will concentrate on three areas: organizational structure, curriculum reform, and naming.

Organizational structure

One of the most fundamental changes to the educational model at the WdKA is its organizational structure. The academy has adopted a model of collectivized structures concerned with solidarity and an attitude that respects an ecology of practices and knowledges. Our art school has become a learning environment that welcomes different perspectives, views, experiences, and backgrounds. The academy has a hiring policy oriented towards a diverse faculty and staff, combined with an active student recruitment campaign and merit aid scholarship programme. Furthermore, there have been substantial changes in the curriculum (I will return to this) that reflect Rotterdam's multi-ethnic society. All teaching staff have permanent work contracts. Building on a pedagogic practice (since the mid 2010s) of having a teaching team in each course, the WdKA has

implemented a collectivized structure of affinity groups. Affinity groups are groups representative of different communities within the academy. They are informal spaces for students to share their experiences, spearhead new initiatives, curate and organize student-led events.

A brief clarification: Affinity groups are not independent silos, but function as platforms for voices often relegated to the margins. They are designed to give space to talk about issues or address the structures that push certain voices to the margins. The affinity group transfers these discussions into action in order to generate a more equitable learning environment. These conversations drive the school to be less "assimilationist-oriented"[43]>> and give space for multitudinous, pluralistic, and nuanced conversations about belonging.

Student-led events have been mostly successful and well attended by many students, as well as staff and faculties, in the academy. They have proved an effective means of coming together, introducing a broad spectrum of interests and experiences. Furthermore, the WdKA has acknowledged the students' right to free assembly and consequently adopted (starting in 2021) a student protest policy.

The WdKA has also established (beginning in 2022) a community safety group as a system for institutional accountability. It is a responsive space for conflict resolution and complaint procedures to ensure a welcoming learning space at the academy. The group creates a space for students, teachers and other staff to share their experiences with racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. The community safety group uses an intersectional approach in their work.[44]>> The group analyses each complaint within a wider systemic frame. Furthermore, the group pools together individual complaints to help build up a more comprehensive analysis of systemic inequalities, structural racism, and systemic violence connected to the complaint. Based on their research, the community safety group makes recommendations for pedagogical training and provides written responses to pressing issues. For example, the community safety group (starting in 2024) successfully implemented a requirement for implicit bias training for anybody involved in admissions and within the teaching training program. Moreover, teachers at the WdKA undergo sensitivity training where they learn about intersectionality, transformative justice, and conflict resolution methods.[45]>>

By far, the most significant transformation to the organizational structure has been in its leadership: the school board, upper management, and the dean's office. No longer held by a single individual, the dean's position comprises a collective and diverse team of three people, assembled using similar hiring and recruitment procedures as those used for students, teaching, and faculty staff. The "dean collective" is accountable to a student advisory board made up of delegates from each of the affinity groups who, in a democratic process, elect one representative from each group to speak on their behalf. Upper management and the school board follow a similar hiring and accountability procedure.[46]>>

Curriculum reform

Curriculum reform has been incremental and instigated using various strategies. Thanks to the hiring policy, new input by new teaching staff contributed (feminist, decolonial, posthumanist, postcolonial, queer, anti-racist) perspectives, helping to reshape the curriculum. Curriculum reform focuses on de-centering the Eurocentric canon by integrating the history and significance of non-Eurocentric practices. Furthermore, changes in the curriculum (references, theories, practices) reflect Rotterdam's multi-ethnic society and foster a deepening of knowledge of the local communities. Embodied research methods introduce collaborative, sensuous, perceptive, somatic, integrative, and non-verbal pedagogies that emphasize the body and site as a space for learning. Embodied research methods get students to explore their own complexity and entanglement with others in the space and the surroundings. The academy's modus operandi centers on cultivating a space of collective learning based on a paradigm of interdependency. Collectivized learning methods, ethical care practices, forms of relationality and well-being (not the same as being happy)[47]>> make up the main support structure for the academy's current learning environment.

There are no neutral techniques or methods for any learning experience. What is or needs to be considered "knowledge" cannot be separated from the "why" of knowing.[48]>> In the year 2030, a community of learners is made up of the student advisory board, teachers, and community stakeholders who have a vested interest in art education at the WdKA. Together they build up curriculum teaching resources using texts and other materials. Furthermore, students receive study credits for their contributions. Their input is part of their education at the academy and is an important part

of their studies. Transdisciplinary forms of working, an ethos of cooperative communities, dialogue, and collaboration, are forms of collectivity, and forms of assembly.[49]>> They comprise useful tools and competencies for cultivating a conscious responsibility towards society.

Acknowledging the wounds of colonialism in the Netherlands, the WdKA has also implemented a non-extractive exchange program based on systems of redress. The WdKA (in 2024) established partnerships with institutions from former Dutch colonies. For each Dutch student participating in the exchange, the WdKA subsidizes the studies of one local student. Partnering institutions choose which students should travel to the Netherlands, selected based on who would benefit most from the exchange, and providing mobility for whom mobility is not easily accessible.

Naming

It may come as no surprise when I tell you that the WdKA (which is no longer the WdKA) adopted (in 2025) a renaming policy. With the implementation of a new organizational structure as well as curriculum reform, it made little sense to continue with the name of a white, male Dutch abstract expressionist artist to represent the face of a progressive, forward-moving art academy. Changing narratives requires changing names. Have a look at the front façade of the building, facing the Blaak station. You will notice that the fluorescent sign with the slogan "I have to change to stay the same" has been replaced by a large magnetic board, covered with magnetic letters spelling out the school's current name: GUDSKUL.[50]>>

The academy has developed an annual practice of giving the art school a new name. Each year, a different affinity group gets the assignment of coming up with a new name for the school, which they decide after a participatory process. Previous names have been Wi Masanga, Roffacademy, Gabber and Perron Nul, among others.

How did this happen?
2020. From hobbyist speculators to dedicated researchers, with the felicitous support of scholarships and research funding: many devoted their attention to the transition. That is to say, the pivotal moment between two futures, breakdown and collapse, restoration and repair, when a decision was made to prevent any further polarization and come together. People were

grappling at whichever theories could help them understand what was happening – a virus created in China's labs, imperialist propaganda, science fiction narrative with political conspiracy. Part of you wanted to correct and reprimand what others were saying around you. Another part just wanted to let others voice their fears, and there were many, and to stay with the people with whom you could feel safe. This strategy worked, at least for a while.

After the first wave of the virus hit, where it seemed that the entire world was in lockdown for months on end, everybody got lazy. Maybe they were just fed up with the uncertainty of it all. There seemed no end to the current situation and many just wanted to forget the unprecedented nature of such a global event, even momentarily. When it seemed that the worst part of the crisis had passed, many just went back to business-as-usual, trying to return to normality. During those summer months, people seemed more interested in spending their free time going shopping than participating in mutual aid forms. When the second wave hit, the virus infected seven billion people worldwide, resulting in millions of deaths. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news.[51]>>

Even during the first wave, it became evident which were the ones most affected by the pandemic. At least to those who kept their eyes open to the events unfolding in their neighbourhoods, communities, and in other parts of the world. At the Afrikaanderwijk Cooperative, cooperative members and volunteers during the lockdown pivoted their activities to mutual aid, to provide support for the most vulnerable in their neighbourhood around Rotterdam Zuid. (Mutual aid is a reciprocal support network, one in which people often exchange care and resources in times of crisis and emergency. It differs from the organizational model typically applied in charity, where an external institutional body distributes unidirectional support. People living within a community or local setting – such as a neighbourhood or a residential building – create networks that have people's well-being at heart). [52]>> The cooperative members received food donations, delivered groceries, sewed masks, and helped people fill out government support forms.[53]>> This immediate response to the lockdown was not unique to the Afrikaanderwijk Cooperative, nor to that particular neighbourhood. Mutual aid networks were popping up everywhere around the world.[54]>> Initiatives appeared in China,[55]>> Vietnam,[56]>> the Philippines,[57]>> South Africa,[58]>> Turkey,[59]>> Greece,[60]>> France,[61]>> Spain,[62]>> the United Kingdom,[63]>> Guatemala,[64]>> Canada,[65]>> and the USA, among others.[66]>>

Perhaps you might also recall a conversation you had in passing with one of the cooperative's members. Anticipating the next stages of crises, she mentioned that some of the members were already starting to speculate on the forthcoming waves of food, health,[67]>> housing[68]>> and work security.[69]>> Some members felt the urgency to create strong networks, in all locales, joining forces, learning from each other, and sharing best practices.

In hindsight, what was happening was the unfolding of two narratives, or one could even say ontologies of the pandemic. Was the pandemic an enemy that we needed to fight? Or was it a global experience that might be leading to learning new conditions or reimagining? These were the two storylines being played out.

Indeed, many tendencies emerging within civil society and art and design suggested a movement towards the latter. When I write to you about civil society, I am also thinking about the impact that socio-political shifts and disturbances have on art and design practices, and how art and design can potentially return the favor by creating changes within society. Artists and designers have the propensity for imagining alternatives (even dark ones). It is an essential component of what art is about.[70]>> But you already know this.

In retrospect, I understand now that the socio-political shifts catalyzed in part by the global pandemic helped push the development of the fields of art and design into fruitful terrains. I am making these delineations between art and design, but I strain in writing the word "art" next to the word "design". These juxtapositions are artificial and forced. Let's call them "creative practices", not to be mistaken with the term "creative industries", with its relation to entrepreneurship, individualism, competition, ownership/property, and even a particular form of practicing "fine art" through the production of commodities for the market economy. It is not the same; it is actually worlds apart. It is more aligned to a notion of "creation" as it suggests an ethical responsibility to nurturing – this is what we are trying to develop and shape. The term gives expression to the system's complexity and acknowledges that what matters is the ongoing process of life. It assumes that we live under circumstances that destabilize our way of being, and enable us to develop creative ways of working through whatever troubles we encounter.[71]>> Therefore, I will go even further by proposing the term "creation practices". The term embodies best the reshaping of artistic and design practices and art education over the past decade, until the present now, 2030.

Speaking about forms: Starting from your present now, 2020, new forms from new practices created new models that spoke not about building an idealized world. It meant a process of flowing with the flow until we could come to an understanding of what we could rely on. I will make another brief digression by stating that I am using the word "we" for your benefit. Actually, not for your benefit, but for the benefit of the vernacular of the present, your present. You are well aware that English is a very imprecise language, and it is never clear what is meant by the "we". Although at first glance, "we" could imply that everybody belongs, use of the "we" can actually have an opposite effect, by absorbing and thereby silencing marginalized voices. The far-right's appropriation of the "we" in your time is a particularly unsettling example of what happens when a collection of bodies speaks as one. The viral proliferation of QAnon followers has placed the "we" under its servitude for propagating far-right global conspiracy theory.[72]»

Neither are "us" and "them" useful terms, as they encourage polarization. These terms only exacerbate the culture wars and encourage ideological skirmishes that forces one to take a fixed position, by saying that one is on "this" or "that" side. I am not speaking against having a political attitude or being clear in what kind of society you want. But the methodologies and aesthetics and emotions – if they run through modes of distortion, by producing unreadable bodies, unreadable materials, aesthetics,[73]» then it might be way forward from this "trench warfare" mentality.

There is a need to skip over forced dichotomies, or forms of inclusivity that do little to de-center or dismantle any of the power relations in place, preventing any significant transformation in society. We need new terms. These are terms, neologisms, that channel the zeitgeist or defining spirit of a particular period in history. For this reason, allow me to introduce another pronoun (I just learned about it myself). Starting now, I will use "Iasus" in place of "I" and "we." In Asian language, one refers to oneself in relation to someone – "Iasfriend," "Iasmother," "Iasfather," "Iasbrother,"– which reverts the idea of describing oneself as an independent "I". "Iasus" was introduced in 2021, first as a meme, then translated into many languages ("Ikalsons" in Dutch) before becoming integrated into the everyday language by the younger generation. Situating itself between the "I" and the "we," the use of the pronoun "Iasus" helped propagate a profound shift in ways of being together. It meant unlearning individuated ways of relating to the world, and reinscribing oneself as an interdependent being. That is to say, an "I" in connection to other "I"s,[74]» other

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bodies, other living entities, other perspectives, other experiences, and other resources, on a planetary[75]>> scale. In simple terms, the non-binary approach that you nurture in your collective experiments at Tender Centre.[76]>>

Iasus shall continue. In addition to mutual aid reciprocal support networks, there were other indicators of new forms of "creation practices" that followed the aims and goals of progressive social and political movements.[77]>>

The Black Archives[78]>> art project by Mitchell Esajas, for example, substantially intersected its activities with "Kick Out Zwarte Piet" (KOZP),[79]>> which in turn was affiliated by Black Lives Matter NL whose aims were mostly identical with KOZP. Esajas was himself one of the 2019/2020 BAK fellows, invited to develop his research project. His project explored the genealogy of anti-racist and anti-colonial activism among Dutch-Caribbean people, combining archival research from The Black Archives, oral history, and research on artistic practices related to this history.[80]>> BAK, or *basis voor actuele kunst*, a Utrecht-based contemporary art space, fashioned itself as a critical platform for aesthetic-political experimentation into ways of being together otherwise, bringing together diverse thinkers, practitioners, collectives, and precarious groups. Looking back, BAK's long-term research project "Propositions for Non-Fascist Living"[81]>> was one of the programs developed within contemporary art institutions that helped influence the reshaping of art education and its curriculum at the WdKA.

There were others.
Already in your time, one could see institutions like the Rotterdam-based cultural space WORM facilitating fluid, hybrid and heterogeneous forms of production, programming, and presentation, which attracted diverse audiences to their venue. WORM was never a curatorial institution but a DIY artists/musicians initiative coming out of the squatter scene. Their enduring DIY spirit, reflected in their programming, communicated an attitude of cultural spaces as places of action, forms of cooperation and knowledge production; as welcoming spaces for different communities to come together. WORM was more an open platform than a fixed space: open to varied manifestations of action-reflection, receptive to diverse materializations of forms that reflected Rotterdam – a multicultural, diverse, and heterogeneous city.[82]>> I could start to introduce some global trends of collective practices in the arts. For brevity, I will continue my focus on the local level.[83]>>

One could have a quick look at the 2020 programme "Gentle Strategizing" at the MAMA Showroom, a stone's throw away from the WORM. "Gentle Strategizing", a week of collective activities, brought together marginalized activist groups at the local level to reflect on ways of building together socially just spaces and safe spaces in the climate of the pandemic, socio-economic and racial injustice.[84]>> Or to recall that the contemporary art space Witte de With (across the street from the MAMA Showroom) was engaged in an exhausting, three-year process of changing its institutional name, named after a Dutch naval officer who worked for the Dutch East India Company and Dutch West India Company. Changing the name of an institution was an act of disengaging its identity from a legacy of colonial violence, enacting an "un-silencing" to colonial "silencing". It was a push for systemic change by enacting an anti-racist policy; its institutional name change, its programming, its diversification of staff and board members.[85]>>

These conversations were taking place in a climate of an ongoing debate on diversity and inclusion, and a critique of the discourse of "diversity" in art, art education, and society. Indeed, diversity was a topic high on the agenda of the cultural sector. Debates, reports, and campaigns for decolonizing art and educational institutions were also part of an active and ongoing discussion.[86]>> Yet there was a growing disenchantment with institutional performative "wokeness", a type of performative posturing that amounted little more to empty gestures, generating many questions and critiques on how much these institutions were willing to move and shift. To put it bluntly, cultural contemporary art institutions and educational spaces – no matter how many reconfigurations to policy plans or representations in program booklets – remained, at their core, fundamentally white spaces.[87]>> Optics were not enough.

That is to say, it was not all euphoric and optimistic.[88]>> Many institutions failed to meet their high ambitions, became irrelevant, moved towards obsolescence. Other new spaces emerged.

Although I have been writing using minuscule script throughout this entire letter, my space is almost up. I am at the last few lines of the final side of the third sheet of paper. Therefore, let me conclude with these final words.

In the past decade, Iasus were in a pivotal moment for those who dared dream brave thoughts never given the space because most of us were so uselessly busy proving our lives away. And I am pleased to have been able to witness such a significant transformation of the art academy (GUDSKUL formerly known as the WdKA) into a critical and challenging, a caring and welcoming, space of collective learning.

Safe travels for your return.

Yours,

G

Endnotes

1   Here I am extrapolating the notion of paradigm shift in science as defined by Kuhn (1962) onto arts and society.

2   As described, among others, by Garnham (2005).

3   Such as in the formal project funding requirements of the Mondriaan Fund and the newly created "Stimuleringsfonds Creatieve Industrie".

4   As partly described by Barendregt et al. (2009).

5   Historically researched by Ban et al. (2011).

6   Numbers taken from Rutten et al. (2019, p. 21)

7   As analyzed by Rutten et al. (2019, p. 7)

8   Schomer (2020) estimates that on a global scale, "[b]rands are set to spend up to $15 billion on influencer marketing by 2022".

9   As conceptually sketched in Chabot et al. (2013) and translated into WdKA's current Bachelor curriculum.

10 Covered for the discipline of art history and curatorship by Grant and Price (2020).

11 According to the influential definition of Osborne (2013).

12 The mismatch between cultural institutions and a diverse urban demographics has been researched for Rotterdam in Perlstein et al. (2020).

13 See the collection database entry (Amsterdam Museum, 2020).

14 As described in Boston-Mammah (2017).

15 Even the standard definitions of "creative industries" include designer fashion labels but exclude the larger fashion industry, such as the one of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport [UK (2019, p. 15).

16 This may explain why the paradigm of so-called 'white cube' gallery and museum art resurged after having been questioned in the 1960s and 1970s, notably in O'Doherty (1976).

17 According to ArtFacts (2020), filtered by "Living Artists".

18 On the prominence of Yale School of Art graduates on the art market, see Galenson (2005).

19 Summary of Ullrich (2016).

20 Described among others in Steyerl (2017) and depicted in Nolan (2020).

21 As analyzed by Piketty (2017).

22 Detailed analysis by Boltanski and Esquerre (2020).

23 This reflects a larger societal problem caused by post-Cold War economic developments already in place, as more comprehensively analyzed by Sandel (2020).

24 Forum voor Democratie. (2020, September 15). 2040: Onze visie op de toekomst van Nederland. https://youtu.be/5NWh_AzTQXg?t=158

25 As described in Doucet (2016). See also Florida (2014) and the author's later critical revision of his standpoints in Florida (2017).

26 In 2020, NYU has campuses and centers in Abu Dhabi, Tel Aviv, Shanghai, Accra, Buenos Aires, Berlin, Florence, London, Madrid, Paris, Prague, Sydney, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. A comparable model exists at the cultural theory-oriented Swiss and Maltese private European Graduate School (EGS) which offers online tutoring combined with summer schools and employs celebrity visiting lecturers such as Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler, as documented on its website (The European Graduate School, 2020).

27 As described by Piketty (2017).

28 On the concept of parallel art worlds, see Becker (2008).

29 In electronic literature, creators and audience work almost exclusively within academia and are largely identical with each other, as researched by Seiça (2016).

30 See Higgins and Kahn (2012), and the academic Art-Science journal Leonardo published by The International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technology.

31 This observation is based, among others, on the presentations of European Art-Science research lab residency programs at Shanghai Forum, Centre Pompidou x West Bund Museum Shanghai and Donghua University, Shanghai, in November 2019, which included the artist residencies at CERN and the Max Planck Institute.

32 As described by Shanken (2011).

33 As obvious, among others, in the regular inclusion of Art-Science projects and art research labs at the Dutch Design Week in Eindhoven.

34 For example, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Taipei and the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts in Taichung had structural collaboration with the Dutch media arts and Art-Science institutes V2_ (Rotterdam) and Waag Society (Amsterdam) in the 2010s.

35 A good example being the Next Nature Lab of TU Eindhoven.

36 See Vallas and Schor (2020).

37 The company's revenue grew by 42% in 2019, according to its own business report (Fiverr, 2020).

38 According to Schiffer (2020).

39 As analyzed, among others, by Maity et al. (2016).

40 As reported by Beltrone (2019).

41 As described, among others, by Marshall (2015).

42 See Burrows and O'Sullivan (2019, p. 315–336).

43 See for example Bell (2015).

44 See for example Bell (2015).

45 See for example Bell (2015).

46 See Sara Ahmed's cultural critique on happiness (2010).

47 See Sara Ahmed's cultural critique on happiness (2010).

48 As analyzed in Freire (1978).

49 See for example Hardt and Negri (2017); Butler (2015); Edu-Factory Collective (2009).

50 GUDSKUL is named after ruangrupa's homonymous school project in Jakarta. As described in Vanhoe (2017).

51 As described, among others by Christakis (2020).

52 As described by Herbst and Teran (2020).

53 For example, contemporary art space BAK (2020) facilitated a discussion on mutual aid practices.

54 See Sitrin and Colectiva Sembrar's (2020) extensive report on mutual aid.

55 Matters (2020) reports on mutual aid and the rebuilding of the Chinese society.

56 Employees of HCM City company provide free rice to disadvantaged people. As reported in Vietnam News (2020).

57 Pagasa – People for Accountable Governance and Sustainable Action (2020).

58 Cape Town Together (2020).

59 Kadıköy (2020) is a solidarity network in Turkey.

60 Georgiades (2020) reports on a worker-occupied factory in Greece that sends soap to a refugee camp.

61 Permanente (2020) reports on how workers in France take over McDonald's to distribute food.

62 Raj (2020) gives an overview of solidarity actions in Barcelona.

63 Reflections by Cayuela (2020) on setting up a solidarity kitchen in Birmingham.

64 España (2020) describes how volunteers in Guatemala deliver free food to truck drivers.

65 The People's Pantry Toronto (2020).

66 Mutual Aid Network Los Angeles (2020).

67 Eurofound (2020) has published multiple reports on living, working and Covid-19.

68 The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project (2020) has developed the "COVID-19

Global Housing Protection Legislation and Housing Justice Action Map"
which is an overview of global housing legislation and housing justice
action initiatives. The map is used to locate legal aid against evictions
or landlord harassment and community organizers in each local area.
This map is an emergency response project and was developed in
collaboration with Mapping Action Collective, Tenants Together, San
Francisco Anti-Displacement Coalition, Community Justice Project, and
the European Action Coalition for the Right to Housing, among others.

69 ILO (2020) reports that as job losses escalate, nearly half of global
workforce are at risk of losing livelihoods.

70 See Morley and Sholette (2020).

71 As described by Herbst and Teran (2020).

72 I hesitate to give QAnon any more space than it is already taking. A quick
look through Wikipedia (n.d.) will suffice.

73 As formulated by artist Johannes Paul Raether (2020) in the round table
discussion "Propositions #9: Solidarity with La Colonie" at BAK basis voor
actuele kunst. I also credit Raether for proposing the term "Iasus" used in
this essay.

74 See for example Rizvi (2016).

75 As analyzed by Spivak (2013); Mbembe (2019).

76 Tender Center is a collective of anti-racist feminist queers who are building
a community center for culture and venue for queer events.

77 Morley and Sholette (2020).

78 The Black Archives is a unique historical archive for inspiring conversations,
activities and literature from black and other perspectives that are often
overlooked elsewhere. The Black Archives documents the history of black
emancipation movements and individuals in the Netherlands. The Black
Archives is managed by the New Urban Collective.

79 KOZP is led by Jerry Afriye, a poet. KOZP local Rotterdam leader Elwin
Righters was an actor and theater maker.

80 Retrieved September 29, 2020, from https://www.bakonline.org/person/
mitchell-esajas-2/

81 Retrieved September 29, 2020, from https://www.bakonline.org/
long-term-project/propositions-for-non-fascist-living/

82 Adriaenssens, Brands, Hiddink & Parnell (2020).

83 Ruangrupa, a collective of artists and creatives from Jakarta, Indonesia,
with a ten-member core, is in charge of the artistic direction of "documenta
15". Their curatorial approach will focus on collective practices and aims at
a different kind of collaborative model of resource use – economically, but

also in terms of ideas, knowledge, programs, and innovation. Participants of documenta 15 invited by ruangrupa: Fondation Festival sur le Niger (Ségou, Mali), Gudskul (Jakarta, Indonesia), INLAND (Madrid, Spain), Jatiwangi art Factory (Jatiwangi, Indonesia), Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center (Ramallah, Palestine), Más Arte Más Acción (MAMA) (Nuqui, Choco, Colombia), OFF-Biennale (Budapest, Hungary), Trampoline House (Copenhagen, Denmark) and ZK/U – Zentrum für Kunst and Urbanistik (Berlin, Germany).

84 Retrieved September 30, 2020, from https://thisismama.nl/en/events/home-en/gentle-strategising/

85 On June 14, 2017, Egbert Alejandro Martina, Ramona Sno, Hodan Warsame, Patricia Schor, Amal Alhaag, and Maria Guggenbichler published an open Letter to Witte de With. Co-signed in support by many more people, their letter openly challenged the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art for dealing with an art project on decolonization without having regarded the institution's name and its connection to Dutch colonial history.

86 For discussions on diversity specific to the Netherlands see Wekker, Slootman, Icaza and Vazquez (2016); ACES (2020); McGivern (2020). For debates outside of the Netherlands see Gayle and Khomami (2016); Ray (2020); Hussain (2015); Collymore (2020); Swain (2020); Melaku and Beeman (2020).

87 See for example "Open brief van 600+ kunstprofessionals: Wij zien jullie, witte kunst- en cultuursector", appearing in Theaterkrant (2020).

88 For brevity, I have concentrated on examples of more mainstream contemporary art and cultural spaces in Rotterdam and the Netherlands. I have not spoken about self-organized projects or alternative (non-institutional) schools. For example Le Mardi Gras Listening Collective, Society of the Friends of Parrhesia, Display Distribute, Leftove. rs, Undercommoning.org, Temporary URL (Un/Re/Learning) Academy, Free Home University, Chto Delat's School of Engaged Art, Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind, WHW Akademija: Learning at the Threshold of Another World, The Black School, Pirate Care, Floating University, The Neighborhood Academy, Ecoversities Alliance, Ook Space, SPIN, Salwa Foundation, Cultural Workers Unite, Varia, Publication Studio, Neverland Cinema, Tender Centre, Varia, Concrete Blossom, among others.

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Recent research projects

Bridging Art, Design and Technology through Material Practices (NWO Smart Culture, with Leiden University)
Autonomy Lab (NWA Route Kunst)
Hybrid Publishing (SIA RAAK MKB & WdKA, with Hogeschool van Amsterdam & ArtEZ)

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Social Design Network (Estonian Academy of the Arts, University of Southern Denmark, WdKA, Sint Lucas School, UdK, ELIaSAVA, UNIBZ, RCA, MOME, HAC)

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