

What do I know?
Practices of (un) learning as the foundation for contemporary arts

Dear colleagues: professors, researchers, teachers, students, and others of this renowned University of Groningen.

Introduction

What is the role of the arts in academia? In this opening lecture, I would like to try to uncover the special role of the Arts (practice, research, and education) within an academic context: arts being the creative bridge between science and humanities. A practice of unlearning, a practice of mastering creativity, a practice even of fictive art! Imagine a *university as an artwork*: a university of the future. A fictive university where the arts can serve as a fluid free stream in a creative space. A place where the arts can help us to think along fictional storylines and where undercurrent thoughts and ideas can be uncovered. An artistic laboratory where new possibilities of research and education can be explored. In the words of Pascal Gielen: 'an experimental garden of the social, in which subjects are shaped, personalities evolve.'

University:
Stephen Toulmin's
Critique on Contemporary Academia

Since I entered the university as a young student in the seventies, I was shocked by the formal academic climate, something Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) in his famous *Essays* (1580) already detected in the middle of 16th century as the main problem of modern education. Education – with higher education in the slipstream – seemed an almost exclusive place for rational – extremely disciplinary - research and learning. Professors – just like me – running around in circles based on methodologies of the social and physical science; totally stressed by nominalist goals of publishing in first class scientific journals. The arrogance of an academic tradition which, according to British philosopher Stephen Toulmin (1922-2009) in his groundbreaking essay *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (1990), started at the end of the Renaissance.

This rationalistic cultural construct of science and applied science has become the dominant intellectual framework of (late) modernity. Toulmin questions this reductionistic view on science and tried to open a space for research and learning, that includes thinkers like Montaigne and Shakespeare, who have become a sidetrack in academia. Scholars who offer us 'a way out' based on both philosophical as artistic criteria that break with the daily routine of what we have come to think of as normal research and education. Forerunners with an essayistic approach opening a space for creativity based on the offspring of human ignorance. Montaigne's constant awareness of 'What do I really know?' as a fundamental

modest starting point of an ontological and epistemological and political choice within academia.

Steven Shapin, Professor in the History of Science at Harvard University, together with Simon Schaffer, Professor in the History of Science at Cambridge University highlight the importance of the paradigm of Montaigne in *Wetenschap Is Cultuur* (2005) for which they received the Erasmus prize. Shapin states that there is something completely wrong in the contemporary academia. According to Shapin it is the result of a disciplinary narrow-mindedness and the arrogance of hyper-professionalism. The reason for this is what he calls the 'search to certainty' that marked the academic climate since the 17th century. The illusion of certainty that is far away from the modest practice of Montaigne's 'Que sais-je?'. Modern academia: defined by artificial laws needs an alternative form: a laboratory of natural reason, grounded in concrete experiences.

John Baldacchino's Practices of Unlearning

'Where are the arts?' I asked myself. The Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668-1774) already discussed the opposing cultures of science and humanities within academia. But what is the position of the arts in contemporary higher education? How can the arts as the narrative of 'mastering creativity' function? How can the arts serve as a way out? A deconstruction of the dominant cultural construct? An in-between space of science and humanities? The open space of the painter? The radical freedom of the musician? The imagination of the poet? How can we create a place of intellectual modesty and creative imagination far from the dogma of controllable 'facts'? A place of unlearning instead of learning? A space where fiction rules?

I looked for an answer which led me to the interesting work of John Baldacchino, director of the arts division of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The last ten years he wrote some important essays on the practice of unlearning:

- *Arts way out: Exit pedagogy and the cultural condition* (2012);
- *John Dewey: Liberty and the pedagogy of disposition* (2014)
- *Art as Unlearning: Towards a Mannerist Pedagogy* (2018)
- *Educing Ivan Illich: Reform, Contingency and Disestablishment*(2020)

In Baldacchino's work John Dewey's (1859-1952) famous Harvard Lectures *Art as an Experiment* (originally published in 1934) is a central text. Dewey, according to Baldacchino presents us 'a horizon of creativity' where the artificial distinction that is often made between doing and thinking, reflecting, and acting, knowing and being, becomes obsolete. Freedom is what it is all about. Freedom as the liberation of oppressive forces. The rejection of any form of idealistic or empirical certainty. Freedom as a way for discovery. A formative aesthetic in which thought is action and action is thought. Freedom as choice: the freedom to choose whatever you want.

Baldacchino in the end concludes that the Deweyan pedagogy, 'cannot be schooled' in a conventional way. The 'practice of learning' can best be defined as 'a practice of unlearning'.

Unlearning is something that goes beyond the institutional boundaries. Unlearning is in fact a mannerist approach that has some resemblance to the serpentine style of Michelangelo. An experiment in *'willing forgetfulness'* instead of the positivistic call for prove and certainty. Baldacchino – in line with Dewey – wants to tear down the institutional walls. He criticizes the contemporary focus on management feasibility. He makes an argument for a philosophical feasibility. A turn towards autonomous research and education that according to the Dutch philosopher in education Gert Biesta, means to take a risk.

Mastering Creativity Practices of Creativity

The work of Baldacchino I refer to is firmly rooted in the work of John Dewey, like John Dewey's work is firmly rooted in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), especially in *The American Scholar* (1837) and *The Conduct of Life* (1860). Ideas that are directly linked to the work of Goethe, Montaigne, and Plato. They are all in some way connected to the free and creative spirit that is so characteristic for the work of the artist. Let us try to elaborate somewhat more on the meaning of this creative practice within higher education. Therefore, we first must understand what creativity is. I would prefer to define creativity as a 'language-game', to be more specific, a 'creative language game'. A creative language-game that has quite a different grammar than the language we usually use as teachers and students. A language that is grounded on the premise to transform an old form into a new form. A language where imagination plays a key role. A language that can be identified as an endless fluid river. A Proustian form of knowledge production, like a novel based on fictional storylines. A language where the original and unique story is far more important than the repeatable and controllable formula.

In my dissertation *The Shadow of the Artwork: Art Based Learning in Practice* (2012) and *Studies in Art Based Learning* (3 volumes) (2019) a triptych on the works of Mark Rothko, Gerhard Richter and Cy Twombly, I started to describe the artistic researcher as a 'creator': self-directed, object-related, connected with possible worlds and in a constant process of meaning making. Coutinho, an educational publisher, asked me to reflect on my own practices, in a handbook. I accepted their request with some hesitation. In fact, I felt a contradiction between the concept of unlearning and the idea of a handbook. The reason that I finally accepted was the demand of several of my students to get some more tools to open their hidden creative talents. Reflecting on my own practice I discovered twelve creative strategies, that seemed crucial in my creative acts. I will summarize the five most important ones.

1. The first creative practice that fitted within the context of 'practices of unlearning' was C.S Pierce's (1839-1914) 'abductive thinking'. Instead of a deductive argument (theory) or an inductive test (experiment) abductive reason is a creative form of thinking (innovative). To enter this world of new thoughts we do not have to look for proof. We can rely on our presumptions. In line with the words of the American architect Richard Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983): 'because presumption is the portal to a world of the 'unknown'.'

2. A second creative practice I call 'aleatoric thinking'. In this, I am inspired by the work of John Cage (1912-1992), the composer of 4'33. A form of music that is like the visual work of Cy Twombly (1928-2011) and the dancing practice of Merce Cunningham (1919-2009). Aleatory is in fact playing with coincidences. It is a constant dialogue with what is not planned. The ability to understand and integrate a surprise coming from inside or outside. Serendipity can also be identified as an aleatoric principle.
3. A third creative practice is 'associative thinking'. I was inspired by the original work of one of the leading psychoanalysts nowadays, Christopher Bollas, the author of *The Shadow of the Object. Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (2017). Bollas considers irrational combinations, that pop up in our imagination, as subconscious storylines. Associations are in fact part of the 'unthought known'. Something we know, but we did not think of yet. Bollas refers to this free creative mind as the opposite of the imprisoned fascist mind.
4. A fourth creative practice is 'allegoric thinking'. In this, I am inspired by the groundbreaking work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, especially their famous book *Metaphors We Live By* (2003). In this original thinking strategy, the thought-images are a constant source of inspiration. The thought-image that triggers our ideas and helps us to understand our environment. True creators often surrender to these allegoric images, as the underlying structure of their story.
5. A fifth creative practice is 'affirmative thinking'. It is rooted in the work of Harold Bloom (1930-2019), Richard Rorty (1931-2007) and Stanley Cavell (1926-2018). Cavell in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (2003) rediscovered Ralph Waldo Emerson's *The Conduct of Life* (1860). Emerson, the great essayist, and poet, one of the main affirmative thinkers I know. In *Self-Reliance* (1841) he states: 'To believe your own thoughts, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men, that is genius. Speak your latent conviction and it shall be the universal sense.(...)'

**John Rice's
Black Mountain College**

Looking for an example of a university that is based on the principle of 'mastering creativity', I turn my head back towards the long history of arts and science and return to the example of Black Mountain College in North Carolina (1833-1857). John Andrew Rice (1888-1968), the founder and first rector, stated in his autobiography *I Came out of the Eighteenth Century* (1942) that the center of the curriculum of this college was the (liberal) arts. The integrity of the artist served the integrity of democratic people. Instead of the integrity of hating and fighting, supporting the integrity to create. The artist, for Rice, was no pitiful competitor. He only competed with himself. In my educational design practice, Black Mountain College is still the main source of inspiration. Looking back, I see a constant line, from Michelangelo's liberated artist to Montaigne's essayistic explorations, to Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Self-Reliance*, to John Dewey's experimental designs and to my own educational designs; (No) University, Artist Educator, Art Based (Un) Learning and Create Space. Something I tried to

define as the pursuit of the creative reason in my last three essays: *De Scheppende Rede: Introductie tot het werk van Ralph Waldo Emerson [The Creative Reason: Introduction to the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson] (2020)*, *De ideale leraar. Op zoek met Montaigne [The Ideal Teacher. In search with Montaigne] (2022)* and *De leraar als kunstenaar: in dialoog met Michelangelo [The Teacher as an Artist. In dialogue with Michelangelo] (2023)*.

Let's dive somewhat deeper into the magic of Black Mountain College, as described in Eugene Blume's (ed.) *Black Mountain College. An interdisciplinary Experiment (2015)* - that can serve as a prototype for a contemporary college or university. According to the teachers Black Mountain College was 'A laboratory where ideas were constantly put to the test through free experimentation.' Black Mountain College's theoretical concept was developed by John Dewey, further developed by Anni and Joseph Albers (after the closure of Bauhaus in 1933), evolved thanks to great teachers like Richard Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983) and Willem de Kooning (1904-1997), and ascended under the leadership of the beat poet Charles Olson (between 1951-1957).

The freshmen year was in fact the most important part of the Black Mountain College education. There the students learned to unlearn. To play with the rules. To become free. To 'open up' a creative space. About her teaching method Anni Albers (1899-1994) stated: 'I tried to put my students at the point zero. I tried to have them imagine, let's say, that they are in a desert in Peru, no clothing, no nothing, no pottery even at that time, and to imagine themselves at the beach with nothing. And it is hot and windy. So what do you do? In fact, students tried to write 'backwards' just to challenge the existing practices.

In the bachelor program there was a strong focus on arts & craft as a way of 'thinking by doing'. Craft because, in this '*experiment in art*', as the poet and curator Vincent Katz calls it, there was a strong emphasize on materiality. This focus on materiality had practical reasons, but also a spiritual dimension. As you can see in the exhibition of the Anni and Joseph Albers (1888-1976) in the Art Museum The Hague *The Study for Homage to the Square (1949-1976)* of Joseph Albers was like a meditation on color. Famous artist of the twentieth century like John Cage, Cy Twombly, Merce Cunningham, Franz Kline and Robert Rauschenberg all studied at Black Mountain College. Chemistry, biology, psychology, history, and philosophy were part of research and education.

In the end, Black Mountain College was an organization without a strict hierarchy. In this non-hierarchical place by Lake Eden, with a Board of directors that included William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) and Albert Einstein (1879-1955), students participated on all levels. Charles Olson (1910-1970) was very radical in his belief in the concept of unlearning as the foundation for creativity. He removed every form of assessment and diplomas, convinced that it would disturb the pursuit of creative inspiration. He surely would agree with Montaigne, defining teaching as 'a profession without a name'. In 1957, the experiment came to an end due to financial problems. Still, the legend of Black Mountain College is living till this day on.

The Future is Near

Fictive Universities

Now let us turn our heads to the future and use fiction as a tool to imagine *a university as a work of art*. Fictive structures are important because they challenge the dominant cultural constructs that need to be questioned. They make it possible to escape from the set boundaries within an existing context. That what we call 'out of the box' thinking. How would this fictional university look like? How to imagine a Black Mountain College 2.0? Antoinette La Farge, new media artist and professor at the University of California (Irvine), introduces in *The Sting of the Tale (2022)* an art form that can be very useful to advance our inquiry.

La Farge describes a fictive tool called: *fictive art*. Norman Daly (1911-2008), one of the protagonists of this form of art, created a complete fictional civilization called the civilization of Llhuros (a small artefact was recently exhibited at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam). What would a fictional place of uncertainty for students and teachers look like? A creative laboratory, where creative experiments can take place. (No) University, populated by Artist Educators, studying Art Based (Un) Learning. A place for study but also of joy, where you can hear John Coltrane play 'My Favorite Things': the Rodgers & Hammerstein song that became famous thanks to Robert Wise, *The Sound of Music (1964)*.

A university with the name of the sculpture of Marte Röling on the square of the Faculty of the Arts (RUG): '*Non scholae, sed vitae*' (1999). We could construct – at least in our imagination – a faculty like the School for Critical Studies in CalArts Los Angeles. An 'off-space' between science and art, to think in fictional storylines. A place where Montaigne's question 'What Do I Know?' does not lead to a pursuit for certainty but *a pursuit for uncertainty*. A creative space where there is room for imagination! An invitation to the students to travel in possible worlds! A dynamic, open ended, space where the creative reason surpasses the wounds of rationality! An experiment where Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) '*Willing Suspension of Disbelief*' can become real. A university as a work of art!

Postscript

Barend van Heusden (together with Pascal Gielen) already described in *Art Education beyond Art. Teaching Art in Times of Change (2015)* the importance of the arts to reflect on our culture. Reflection is a creative act because it creates meaning. Just like the professional artist who transforms a rock into an image, every scholar can create new meanings, by transforming order into chaos, and chaos into order. A way of research and learning that needs a space for uncertainty.

I hope that in the further collaboration with ArtEZ and the Universiteit Groningen we will work on these creative strategies. Inspired by Minerva (the name of the mythological goddess and the University of the Arts so close) we can complement the rational dominant culture and create a space for practical and creative reason. In the act of designing let us try to remember:

- the use of a self-directed style
- the need to question the dominant rational construct

- the importance to discover more unlearning strategies
- the mysterious practice of mastering creativity
- the promising future of fictive thinking strategies
- the sound of music as an illustration of the anti-fascist mind

I want to thank you, my kind and patient public in this beautiful Heymans Room. Especially the Dean of the Faculty of the Arts of the University of Groningen, Prof. dr. Visser, to have the courage to invest in the collaboration between science, arts, and humanities. And most of all Prof. dr. Barend van Heusden, a true icon in the Dutch arts- and cultural landscape, who helped to create this great opportunity.

Jeroen Lutters
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