



# Critical Pedagogy in the Art Classroom

INTERVIEW WITH AYESHA GHANCHI

Ayesha Ghanchi is an educator and researcher. She has given workshops as part of the Unsettling programme at Rietveld/Sandberg and has been interested in exploring critical pedagogy alongside tutors. Below is an edited version of a conversation between Sekai, Rosa and Ayesha in early May 2020.

**HOW DO YOU THINK THE CURRENT COVID-19 CRISIS REVEALS WHAT IS NEEDED IN ART EDUCATION AND HOW DO YOU THINK IT MIGHT RESHAPE PEDAGOGY?**

This particular moment emphasises the structural inequalities that we already knew existed and that we've been addressing with the Unsettling project.

So, this moment underlines the work that needed to happen anyway. The Covid-19 crisis is another lens to consider who is vulnerable, how are they made more vulnerable and why. What stands out for me after speaking with students and tutors at Sandberg, is that there is a crushing need to know how to deal with moments of oppression or conflict when it arises.

Because in many ways these conflicts are exacerbated by this moment. Especially since this Covid-19 crisis coincides with the worrying trend of flirting with extreme right-wing ideas to be 'provocative' or 'controversial'; or using hidden under the guise of irony to play with sexist or racist ideas as part of a critical inquiry without any real critique.

**WHAT TO DO AGAINST THAT?**

I feel like there needs to be an understanding – in general – not just in this crisis, of how to separate the dialogues regarding 'freedom of expression' and 'freedom of speech' from something that is outright oppressive and shouldn't be indulged. It's really different to the art school of the 1970s where to be controversial or transgressive was more in line with working towards *ending oppression*. Some of the antiracist, antisexist, LGBT politics from the 1970s have been incorporated into policies within art institutions over the years, at face value at least (and the fight is far from over), and the flirting with fascism appears to be an attempt to push back against these gains.

I think we need to push back against right-wing ideas and nationalism with an intersectional *and* contextual approach to identity and politics. Especially for the art school where the tutors, often ask the students to talk about their lives, and their identity, to develop work, I feel the tutor needs to have a deep understanding of identity as a prism that is made of many different parts, and each part becoming more or less important depending on the situation. As a brown disabled Muslim woman, I sometimes have a lot of things stacked up against me, but nowadays I am middleclass as fuck. So for me personally the pandemic is not affecting me so much, whereas if I was working class or an essential worker it would affect me a lot more.





**MAYBE IT'S MORE ABOUT ACKNOWLEDGING AND NOT ABOUT UNDERSTANDING?**

Yes absolutely. And often we tend to think we need to solve problems. Also, we're talking about students in an arts setting. Not about students who study politics or conflict resolution. I don't think the teacher can solve every problem. There has to be a baseline of cultivating respect for everyone's humanity. The baseline is, it's your experience, that's not mine. I am not going to deny your experience, I am going to acknowledge it. Those are facilitation skills that need to be taught.

**"WELL, THAT'S MY OPINION" IS HEARD QUITE OFTEN IN THE CLASSROOM. IT SHUTS DOWN A CONVERSATION. WHAT DO YOU THINK SHOULD BE DONE IN THAT KIND OF SITUATION?**

It really depends on the context, but broadly speaking I hope I would say something like, "What is an opinion to you may have a real impact in someone else's life?" The difficulty is there has to be an openness to learn. If somebody is in that kind of blocked out mode "I am over here and this is my opinion and I am not gonna go over there", your job as a teacher is to create every condition to help guide that person to create steps, like "You know what, it's not so scary to step out of your privileged corner",

or maybe "It is scary to step out of your privileged corner but not as scary as it is for the person with less privilege." Creating opportunities for people to think outside of themselves is the job of the teacher. The potential of the arts context is that people are encouraged to talk about themselves already to explore their identity. There is the opportunity to understand each other on a deeper level.