



Existing together in the structure

INTERVIEW WITH ANJA GROTEN

Anja Groten has been the Director of the Design Department at the Sandberg Instituut since September 2019. She is a PhD candidate at PhD Arts at Leiden University and is also the co-founder of Hackers & Designers. Anja has participated multiple times in the Hear! Here! workshops. This interview between Sekai, Rosa and Anja took place amidst the COVID-19 crisis in early May 2020.

WITH THE CURRENT SITUATION, HOW HAVE THINGS BEEN WITH THE DEPARTMENT?

Together with students and teachers, we have been quite resistant to the notion of online education.

What becomes quite clear is what we value in the way we normally deal with education; our bodies being present in the space. The possibility for contingent collaboration and being open to new things happening informally and socially and all of that doesn't really work now. Knowing what it means to design online platforms for collaboration, I am not a tech pessimist, but a lot is just not possible. You cannot anticipate, you cannot predetermine how relationships evolve. Platforms, in my opinion, fail to address contingency. We have been trying to process this experience of loss together with the students. It's not a moment where we can 'assess' our students. It's more appropriate to think how we can connect and exchange.

We tried to keep the pressure as low as possible for the presentation moment, and in the end, it was a beautiful moment. We were all working with the Etherpad open-source note-taking tool, and Jitsi. We felt very much connected. I think the mindset between departments is very different. It's interesting to see how the situation intensifies positions and different conditions.

WHAT DO YOU THINK THE POST-CORONA ART SCHOOL OR YOUR DEPARTMENT WILL LOOK LIKE? HOW WILL IT HAVE CHANGED?

It is really challenging to talk about the future. It's very difficult to imagine. We just admitted a group of new students, and it was painful to do that because we don't

really know what we're getting them into. We wanted to ensure we also pay attention to people from less privileged backgrounds who perhaps did not have access to the same education that we have. But it's also the worst situation for someone who is already coming from a challenging environment to come and study now. I'm not sure how reliable the structures are of our institutions.

HOW DOES THIS MOMENT RESHAPE YOUR PEDAGOGY?

I have been listening a lot; I have chosen a very transparent way of dealing with the situation; which is also my approach to teaching: being transparent about my anxieties, my position and the limitations of it. But I don't want to burden teachers or students with my questions all the time.

each other, how we encounter each other and how we exchange. Making sure that everyone is able to somehow participate on that level. Every group really has their own desires. Creating enough opportunities to talk about how we meet without being too tiring. What I hear from students is that we can be too accommodating sometimes. There needs to be a balance there.

WHAT TECHNIQUES DO YOU USE TO SPEAK TO PEOPLE THAT THINK DIFFERENTLY?

The workshop at the beginning of the year, by you Sekai, on active listening worked really well and is referred to a lot. It was good that someone from outside came in and that the rest of us were on the same page, or were

treated the same way, teachers and students. And of course there are differences, and we should be aware of them as well. It was a really nice gesture to show that we are there to work with them. That was huge.

CAN YOU THINK OF A TIME WHEN YOUR THINKING WAS CHANGED?

My biggest challenge is to acknowledge my authority. I don't want to be that person, but especially now as the head of a department, I need to be aware of it and not be ignorant of existing hierarchies.

HOW DO YOU APPROACH A DIFFICULT SUBJECT WITHIN THE DEPARTMENT? WHAT DO YOU DO?

It's tricky. There were moments I was regretful I didn't step in earlier. I think it's also important to

call people out and intervene if possible, but if it doesn't work out in the moment, then it needs to be addressed later in some way. It can help to have a little bit of distance, emotionally, and space to organise your thoughts – I am a bit slow, I need some time to understand what's happening. It also helps to get some advice. You also don't want to make a case for something that wasn't really perceived as problematic. Setting a bit of a protocol or setting the scene may help sometimes. We have to make sure we listen and don't interrupt each other. If you do that before, people internalise it. Practice collectively – keep doing it, continue working on it, there will always be backlash but don't let it slip.

YOU MEAN, MODELLING THE BEHAVIOUR EARLY?

I try to discipline myself to listen and not immediately interfere. Try to acknowledge the other position even if it's not yours. Make sure that you respond and speak really clearly from your own position. It doesn't mean that you're trying to convince the other or reducing your own position. I used to be much more confrontational. But that can sometimes shut down dialogue.

WHAT ROLE SHOULD A TEACHER PLAY?

There is a lot we cannot do. We can establish a way of talking to each other, which works better for me than calling people out. Mediation is important.

