

Perfectionism

Sense of urgency

Defensiveness

Quantity over quality

Worship of the written word

Paternalism

'Either/or' thinking

Power hoarding

Fear of open conflict

Individualism

Progress is bigger, more

Objectivity

Right to comfort

(1)

# Reflections on 'White Supremacy Culture'

By the EDITORIAL BOARD and STUDY GROUP members

In 1999, the educator and community worker Tema Okun published an article titled 'White Supremacy Culture', inspired by her colleague and mentor Kenneth Jones.(1) Rather than understanding white supremacy as tied to skin colour, the article departs from the notion that white supremacy has produced a culture, which is engrained in and reproduced by all kinds of institutions and organisations in our society. The text was introduced to the Hear! Here! programme by Joy Mariama Smith during their workshop in March 2020, and by Cissie Fu in March 2021. The document lists the characteristics of 'white supremacy culture' and also offers 'antidotes'. While the text originates from the US context, we felt that the culture described in this document is very familiar and relevant to a Dutch art school context. For our final session, during which we reflected on the past year, we discussed some of the characteristics described in the document and how we relate to them within the art school classroom. Below is a shortened and edited version of our conversation on 26 May.(2)

Eloise: Perfectionism is about being perfect, and is also an expectation of perfection from everyone. Mistakes are not considered a form of learning; in perfectionism, mistakes are only failures. As an antidote and as a point of learning for myself (I am a perfectionist!), I talk to my students about failure. How can we rethink making mistakes as a form of experimentation, a form of improvisation? It is actually extremely creative. There is no such thing as perfection. In particular I really liked the idea of creating a culture of appreciation as an antidote. This was something we discussed during the 'DasArts' feedback method workshop. Rather than focusing on the mistakes or what does not work, instead time is spent talking about what does work when giving feedback to students and providing support. That is something that I see is often missing from the classroom, and also from everyday life: you take it for granted if something is good or working well – you take it for granted that everybody knows that.

Francisca: I was also thinking of perfectionism and the institution in relation to the worship of the

**written word.** There's often an inability to be flexible or to adapt the organisation to new contexts, and a big reliance on (policy) documents to make things better. I think it is interesting to understand how institutions can introduce flexibility to their policies or rules, seeing as these documents and policies that are intended to help out often actually don't. The written word here is seen as the only valid form, or as perfectionism. How can we learn and relearn to be there for students without a premeditated idea of what should be done, and instead make a learning process that works both ways?

Iskra: I don't know if this is specific to the classroom but one issue may be that there's not enough space to allow for figuring things out on the spot. Sometimes people know something or are the loudest in the room and it then becomes difficult for someone else to show that they don't know. That makes it difficult to learn together. I think that's also something that came up in the 'DasArts' feedback method. In a feedback situation, it's important to take a step back and let go of the first reaction (saying something is 'good' or 'bad'), and to go beyond that in order to create space to articulate feedback that creates a collective learning situation. I think that this 'either/or' really stifles people who are maybe not at the point of knowing yet, because it makes people feel that they should know something, which makes people hide what they don't know, and

then you can't collectively learn. I think this is quite important: to create this delay in the conversation, which is also connected to a 'sense of urgency'.

Judith: I can relate to what Francisca said, that there is only 'one right way'. There's not another way because the protocol has been established by one person who thinks it's logical, and that's the way to go about it.

Rosa: Yes, it's surprising that in an art school that prides itself on being open and creative and radical, such as the Rietveld and the Sandberg even more so, there are actually not so many protocols. This creates this notion of freedom, openness, and flexibility, but for some urgent situations I wish there were more protocols. You're right, there are a lot of habits, attitudes, and norms, also when we think about teaching, the norms and standards for what is 'good' art, what is criticality, how to do things, and what to include, who to include, what are the references, and what is the canon.

Judith: It is presented as a fluid structure that's constantly evolving without a strict hierarchy or structure, yet there is one, which makes it even more difficult to navigate because there is no 'official' structure or protocol.

Francisca: I relate that to **power hoarding**, because sometimes the lack of transparency and clarity also comes with not wanting to distribute power.

Amelia: I'm just thinking about that article we looked at (Timo de Rijk's defensive response to the critique of the naming and framing of the European Commission's 'New European Bauhaus', published by *NRC*).<sup>(3)</sup> You can really feel the insecurity flaring up in the centres of European **power hoarding**, when they get a sense of their increasing irrelevance. They feel like they are losing something, but I'm trying to think about a different framework, where it's not about loss, you know? Those in power might have a lot to lose, but part of the work we can do as teachers is to think about reframing that narrative. Because white supremacy sucks for everyone! Obviously, it sucks for white people in a very different way, but I don't want to live in a state of inherited ignorance and delusion, and I don't want to think about dismantling the structural violence of white supremacy in terms of loss or, even worse, sacrifice... An emancipated world isn't just better for the dispossessed – it's better for everyone.

Philip: The thing that I really picked out is this idea that from both sides, the students and the tutors are somehow at stake with what they are bringing to the equation. It's very easy for criticism or, you know, observation to hurt people. And that's understandable, but it seems that that part is actually some kind of internalisation of a kind of process of maybe **objectification**, where you understand that the thing you

have done also means that you are a problem. If you make a work and people don't like it, somehow, it's you that's the issue. I think within the organisational framework that this text is talking about, it's sort of like a privatisation of blame. I guess that maybe the antidote would be a de-individuation, like understanding the idea the way this becomes a problem for you, the way you not knowing the theory becoming an issue is because you're forced into a position of taking an individual stance or you become the individual, which somehow makes you the object.

Rebekka: I agree with what some of you said before about how the lack of transparency and clarity and the 'openness and spontaneity' of the institution are ways to renounce accountability and to protect the institution's power. This mechanism is not specific to the Sandberg, of course, and it plays out on the level of the institution and on the level of (some) of the courses. Language – the **worship of the written word** (and connected with it: the way one reads, writes, and relates with and around text) – does a lot to perpetuate a culture of white supremacist heteropatriarchy, its ideas on **individualism**, progress, objectivity, time etc.. However, thinking about what, why, and how we read and relate to and around text can also catalyse a negotiation of this culture and its (linguistic/epistemic) affordances, and it can induce imagination and actions towards how to do

it otherwise. So I understand my work as a writing tutor at the Sandberg not as primarily a 'teaching gig' but as a way to mediate and facilitate that kind of negotiation (while being aware that my own position is up for negotiation, too). Recently, I've read adrienne maree brown's *Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation* (2020) and I'd like to share a quote from her book here:

"What would happen if I approached every room I facilitated as an opportunity to support the creation of a culture of liberation, creativity, and inquiry. Culture is not accidental. Culture is a creation that can be tended to and focused in specific ways. Every time people are gathered together, the hegemony of dominant culture is playing out unless there is an intention to be/do otherwise. There are skills and capacities we need to live into the future we believe in and we can develop and practice them in the rooms that we facilitate. [...] A facilitator's role is not to make everyone comfortable. Our job is to help people through their discomfort while using all of the knowledge and feelings in the room to make meaning and take actions informed by the learning. Facilitated environments working in this way open up a space where people get to live into new roles/new shapes."<sup>(4)</sup>

(1) Tema Okun/dRWorks, 'White supremacy culture', 1999. Accessed through: [https://www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun\\_-\\_white\\_sup\\_culture.pdf](https://www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun_-_white_sup_culture.pdf).

(2) Our final session on 26 May, 2021 was recorded. You can find it here: <https://tinyurl.com/5ye9y5s4>.

(3) Timo de Rijk, 'Ontwerpen voor een betere wereld moet groots en gezamenlijk', in: *NRC*, 1 April, 2021. Accessed through: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2021/04/01/red-de-wereld-denkgroots-a4036746>.

(4) adrienne maree brown, *Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation*, Chico, CA: AK Press, 2020.

