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### **Following a string of scandals Call for sector restructuring**

*'Something is fundamentally wrong with arts education'*

Five art schools were recently embroiled in controversy over misconduct. This is no coincidence, says former board member Dingeman Kuilman.

Something is fundamentally wrong in too many areas of Dutch arts education. Dingeman Kuilman says it with a resolute voice. The former chairman of the ArtEZ University of the Arts (ArtEZ) board speaks of 'distorted didactics' and calls for a thorough restructuring of the field. But he deems the likelihood of arts education taking the initiative itself to be small. The business interests in leaving everything as it is are too great, according to him. 'The status quo is carefully guarded.'

One art school after another has been in disrepute for the past two years. In the summer of 2019, ArtEZ suspended the head of the graphic design department after students and former students shared an urgent letter about the unsafe working atmosphere in his department. The man is now a curator at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. More recently, the Royal Academy of Art (KABK) in The Hague, the Design Academy Eindhoven and the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam were also forced to call in external investigation agencies following reports of misconduct. Several teachers were subsequently suspended and the director of the KABK resigned in March.

### **Unsafe learning environment**

The Amsterdam Fashion Institute (AMFI) has also been under fire since March. As was the case with the KABK earlier with an *NRC* publication, a publication in *Het Parool* and *NRC* served as a catalyst for criticism of the AMFI. Both articles described misconduct by a former student, which had already started at the academy. According to fellow students, both were given leeway by the school management to create an unsafe learning environment.

Dingeman Kuilman, director of the Stedelijk Museum Breda since 2016, is not in the least surprised by the string of scandals at art schools. 'No, it's not a bolt from the blue. A lot goes on there.'

The problems go back decades, according to Kuilman. As a former president of a large college, he shows, after some urging, a willingness to discuss how the wrongs may be only now coming to light. He also explained, 'as an involved outsider', what would have to change to make the learning environment at art schools safer. The latter is not an easy task, he realizes. When he proposed major changes as ArtEZ director, he encountered so much resistance that he had to leave after three and a half years.

A matter-of-fact discussion with teachers and students about changes in arts education is virtually impossible, as was Kuilman's experience at the time. 'Proposals were met with a vehemence you cannot imagine in regular education. What artists do is so connected to their identity—any change is thus perceived as a personal attack. The arts as a belief system is very deeply embedded in academies. They are intelligent people; you can talk to them about anything but their faith. That is where you are hitting upon a part of themselves.'

### **Breaking down and building back up**

The investigation report on the unsafe learning environment at the KABK, published in March, stated that 'breaking down and building back up students' still happened there. This is true of more art schools, says Kuilman. That is because so little has been recorded about how to promote students' artistic development.

Eradicate the abhorrent didactic practice of breaking down and building back up again, says Kuilman. 'That is truly outdated. It can inflict enormous damage, also because professional arts education attracts a relatively large number of sensitive individuals. From my time at ArtEZ, I remember students who would be sick to their stomachs by Wednesday if they had an appointment with a teacher on Saturday. While simultaneously looking up to that teacher. Absurd, right? Speak to students about what they are good at, and build on trust. Teaching students something by breaking them down first creates power dynamics and dependence.'

### **What is the rationale behind this teaching method?**

'It has a kind of a hazing side to it. As in, by breaking down and building back up, you become part of a chosen group and the system. And there is probably a presumed beneficial psychological effect on the student's development; you unlock something, you remove blockages. Also, teachers believe that students must be prepared for the reality of the profession. The cultural sector is certainly not a gentle one; teachers believe that students must be prepared for this during their training. That is how they managed it themselves. But it is cold-hearted psychology.'

Shortly after Kuilman started working at ArtEZ in 2010, Elco Brinkman published a memorandum on the future of professional arts education at the request of the HBO Council. According to the former minister, the sixteen Dutch schools with art programmes could improve the level with fewer students: instead of 25,000 students annually, there would be only 20,000.

Like fellow board members, Kuilman opposed the proposed reduction at the time. Wrongfully so, he now believes: 'In retrospect, I think Brinkman was right. The growth of the academies has put pressure on the teaching methods and contributed to the derailments.' Kuilman speaks of a 'perverted system' that overfed the market with art students. 'Academies have to fill too much capacity with mediocrity because they cannot operate financially with half-empty classes. In this way, we all keep up the pretence that we are going to conquer the world with 'top talent'.'

The enormous size of the schools (at ArtEZ, Kuilman was in charge of 3,000 students and 1,000 teachers) is an almost insoluble issue, according to him. 'We think that spreading out with regional facilities is important. Furthermore, the fixed costs are set up in such a way that we cannot go back. Unless the government allocates funds for remediation.'

### **Why is the growth of academies to blame for the wrongs?**

'The problems are deeply embedded in the system. Education, as it were, takes place in fairly closed cultural communities. A drama programme is its own world, even if it is part of a large college. The same holds true for many other programmes with sometimes the same department head for many years.'

'The growth of academies led to resistance within classrooms. I experienced that myself. 'Us from education, and them from ArtEZ,' I heard teachers say. Those departments

are often little kingdoms, as is now evident from the investigations into wrongdoings. Directors, boards and supervisors say: 'We never saw these wrongdoings.' A weak excuse, but it is probably true. Departments within academies can be very closed-off worlds. And the information that comes out is heavily curated.'

### **Why did so many wrongdoings surface recently?**

'That is due to the changed zeitgeist. Things that were considered normal for a long time, or were tolerated, we now question out loud. How we treat each other and the social power dynamics are things we have become sensitive to and have also started to think differently about.'

'In the recent report on the Willem de Kooning Academy, someone said the following about affairs between students and teachers: 'It is not a problem if everyone is of age, is it?' When I studied at the Rietveld Academy, and my wife at the AKI in Enschede, sexual relations between teachers and students were commonplace. And no director ever questioned it. That is completely unthinkable now.'

### **So the wrongs could have come to light much earlier?**

'Definitely. But a major factor is that experiences are now shared on social media. A new kind of openness has emerged. Students no longer go to a confidential adviser or complaints committee but instead take a shortcut and share experiences online. There is a dangerous side to this for the programmes and the people involved: complaints are immediately out in the open.'

'You can also see an emancipation movement among students. They are saying: you cannot treat me like this. I am reminded of the classic scene of the French student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit in 1968, who said to a professor: 'Change your tone, please.' In a milder way, something similar is going on now.'

According to Kuilman, the arts education system has evolved into creative-business services in many areas since the 1980s. Many programmes prepare students for the market. How artistic, Kuilman wonders, are programmes for design, fashion, media and entertainment? And do such study programmes really require as much costly individual supervision as is needed in visual arts, music and drama programmes? Kuilman: 'When I see how graphic design has developed as a study programme, I wonder if that is still arts education.'

His advice to the future Minister of Education: limit the influx of students and use the savings to fund new policies. Also, formulate clear didactics for artistic development so that students know what to expect from a study programme and teachers are well aware of what they are subject to. Kuilman also proposes dealing with a 'sacred cow' in arts education: flexibilization of employment relations. There needs to be a throughput of teachers, he says. 'If a teacher is not performing well, it should not take four years to have them make room for someone else. Teachers are now sometimes tied to programmes for decades. Their personal dogmatism sometimes leaves a heavy mark on study programmes. Also, the vulnerable position of often young teachers with temporary appointments is not in the interest of students.'

### **Wasting time**

Finally, Kuilman advocates that arts education should place less emphasis on careers and advancement and more on citizenship and leadership. He derives that premise from Joseph

W. Polisi, who served as the president of Juilliard School, New York's famed conservatory, for more than 30 years until 2017. Polisi always stressed the social intelligence and citizenship of his students, Kuilman explains. If students could not relate to fellow students, Polisi sent them away, no matter how talented they were. At the same time, he required students to be capable of communicating the importance of art on a social level.

Kuilman: 'You never heard Polisi talk about entrepreneurship. And that is the very thing that Dutch schools have been set up for in recent decades: how to become self-employed, courses in personal branding, building a website, and so on. I say: we are wasting our valuable time on peripheral issues. If you want to change the moral structure of education, do what Polisi did and put the social component and citizenship at the heart of it.' According to Kuilman, it can also prevent teachers from enabling talented students who create an unsafe learning environment with misconduct, as happened at the KABK and the AMFI. 'Such students conform to a caricature of the romantic artist archetype: the veritable, maladjusted mind. That expectation needs to be thrown out immediately. It is also dangerous for those students themselves: when they are left uncorrected, they derail.'

### **Dingeman Kuilman**

Dingeman Kuilman (1961) trained as a graphic designer at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy. He worked at Studio Anthon Beeke, Philips Design, advertising agency FHV/BBDO and was director of Premisela, Institute for Design and Fashion, for eight years. He became chairman of the board of the ArtEZ University of the Arts in 2010. Since its establishment in 2016, he has been director of Stedelijk Museum Breda. He is also chairman of the Sikkens Foundation and Orkest De Ereprijs.

### **Rijksacademie**

Over the past six years, the Rijksacademie van Beeldende Kunsten (State Academy of Fine Arts) in Amsterdam has seen three cases of misconduct by artists-in-residence, according to a confidential report on social safety at the institute, a summary of which has been published. According to the report, there is a 'warm atmosphere' at the Rijksacademie, but there have also been three cases of serious (sexual) misconduct.

One of the cases took place in the private sphere. The second case allegedly involved aggressive conduct by an artist-in-residence, which was then 'dealt with by the team'. The summary does not go into the third case. The Rijksacademie only states that the residency of only one artist was terminated following reports. The report was prepared by law firm Ivy, commissioned by the board of trustees of the Rijksacademie. The Rijksacademie emphasizes that it is in the process of improving 'formal structures and processes' regarding complaints. The protocols for conduct have also been revised.