

Spaces of Un-expected Learning × A Conversation between Annette Krauss, Emily Pethick, and Marina Vishmidt

EMILY PETHICK: I would like to start by asking Annette to talk a bit about *Hidden Curriculum*. The project set out to look at the unintended knowledge, values and beliefs that are part of the learning process in schools, yet go unrecognized as forms of learning. Can you tell us something about the starting points of the project and how it developed?

ANNETTE KRAUSS: I am very interested in questioning how norms and values control our know-how and practices in everyday life. How do these processes contribute towards the development of human relations within social contexts? Scrutinizing remote or hidden learning processes as well as unregulated spaces in everyday situations was a way of

putting forward these investigations in the specificity of the school, with its highly coded environments and implicit habituations. I approached this by trying to dislocate or put aside certain dominant structures, such as notions of 'good' and 'bad,' and to create specific situations that could generate other narratives. This was in order to give the pupils a starting point for relating to school in another way, and to share moments that could lead to different approaches that would be initiated by the students themselves.

We began with practical exercises in which the students handled school chairs or the school building in ways that differed from their everyday practices in school. Rather than an explicit

form of knowledge, what we were touching upon here was more a process of knowing, one that is implicit in the particular modes of practice that are part of our daily life. Questions surrounding where we do or don't walk, or 'how' we walk, are to a large extent the results of implicit codes in everyday practices rather than the results of intentional choices. They are as hard to grasp as they are hidden in their common everydayness. Cross reading these thoughts with Elaine Scarry's¹ investigations on how body experiences are implemented, the role of practices and embodiment in social processes are crucial. A common example that illustrates aspects of bodily knowledge or saved experience in bodies is how we learn to ride a bike. It takes personal training and experience in order to learn it, but once you have learnt it, it is impossible to forget it.

MARINA VISHMIDT: What strikes me as interesting and provocative about this project is the role of the outsider in a place as highly codified and permeated with formal and informal power structures as the school. The school environment is as much dedicated to reproducing various forms of institutional authority, such as the obedience and hierarchies that foster normalization and

1. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

integration, as it is to what is called 'learning.' I wanted to find out a little bit more about how you personally encountered these various power structures within the school (also among the students, if that doesn't broaden the question too much) and what kind of authority you were perceived yourself as bringing into the situation, and how that was influenced by it being an 'art project'?

AK: Situating the project within a school setting meant that I was dependent on the power structures within the schools, which I was also interested in addressing and making explicit. At the same time, I had to struggle with them at the points when they became obstacles to the project. It is certainly possible that such a project can end up reinforcing the power structures that it intends to make visible.

While the project took place during official school times, from the beginning it was clear that the students would have to choose to participate. Some schools couldn't agree on that, they either wanted a whole class to participate, or to make the project an after-school activity. We finally worked with two schools and found two different ways of conducting the project. At the beginning we had great difficulty in getting academic credit for the students participating in the workshop. In one of the schools, for example, we met alongside the normal curriculum, at the same time as other

students followed classes in economics, ethics or history. I also found this quite challenging, and at the same time encouraging, that the students would choose the *Hidden Curriculum* workshops over these subjects. Some of the teachers were continuously nagging the students that if they participated in the workshops they would fall behind with the other subjects. The fact that the majority of the group continued to participate despite this impressed me, but I can also understand the students that gave it up under the pressure of fulfilling the aims of the regular courses. In the end I succeeded in getting some compensation for the students.

Meeting regularly in school, at Casco and in public space, provided the possibility of engaging with different publics, and gave the project different levels of visibility. Our presence in school activated various discussions between teachers about the accountability and consequences of such a project, which they felt was confusing the students and undermining their authority. However, at times I felt much more confusion on the part of the teachers. Besides a few supportive voices, there was a high level of scepticism from their direction. One time a teacher came up to me complaining that he didn't know what to think any more about his school since they allowed such a project to happen.

Leaving the school environment for a moment, in my experience

of being in the city with a group of 17 year-old students, I was shocked by the hostile atmosphere towards the young people. By this I am not talking about the reactions to the actions that they devised, but the way in which they were approached as a group. They were kicked out of a shopping mall when they stood for a moment to discuss where they were going. They told me that young people are not allowed to enter the supermarket next to their school because of the potential trouble they might cause to other customers, whilst spending little money. I was surprised that they handled these situations alone, and when I later asked them why they hadn't asked me for help, they answered that they are used to this kind of treatment when they are spending time in the city.

The group dynamics changed a lot according to the environments where we met, and my role shifted constantly in relation to the different settings. In school I found myself frequently addressed by the students as an artist or – as one of them put it – 'different to the teachers.' One student pointed out that the project allowed them to climb up on cupboards, as opposed to what their teachers would do, which would be to try to get them down, or prevent them from climbing up there in the first place. During the project I became aware that there were many moments like this that would come to define their perception

of my role within school. This included the way the students sat on the tables when we met, or how we used mobile phones in the school building in order to organize ourselves for the following session. Astonishingly enough, when I first brought the students to Casco I found myself increasingly adopting the role of an instructor or tutor, due to the fact that the students were entering an environment they were not used to and were looking to me for guidance on how to relate to this new environment. But I also adjusted my role towards the responsibility of working with a group of young people in an art space.

What is challenging about working within these kinds of power structures is that you cannot deny that you are part of them, so you have to find a way to question them, and at best start a process of renegotiation.

EP: The way you describe how the students were treated in public space sounds familiar in relation to what Paul Gilroy described in his talk recently at the Van Abbemuseum² when he mentioned the former vagrancy law in the UK, which gave the police powers to arrest people just for looking like they were

2. Paul Gilroy, *Multiculture and Conviviality in Postcolonial Europe*, lecture at Van Abbemuseum as part of the *Eindhoven Caucus of Becoming Dutch*, 25 November 2007.

about to commit a crime.

He traced this back to European colonial military strategies, in which conflict was often avoided through the control of situations in advance of their occurrence – pre-emptive strike – which is of course a pertinent issue these days, and still appears to have its root in a fear of the strange. In the UK, ‘hoodies’ : (hooded tops) are banned in many private/public spaces, such as shopping malls, as well as in schools, because they are perceived as threatening and as potentially concealing the students’ identities when they engage in ‘unacceptable behaviour.’ One teenager in Manchester was given an ASBO (anti-social behaviour order), which included a five-year ban on wearing a hooded top.

As you said before, what was striking about taking the students out into the city is that the rules of conduct within public space instantly became clear. When the students formed a barrier by holding hands across a pedestrian street, most of the people passing bent down so as not to disturb the line or to enter into any potential conflict. However, within a few minutes the police arrived to break it up. As you mentioned at the time, this is the best education about public space you can get. Similarly, when you talk about the resistance of the teachers to the project, it also seems to come from a position of fear, and highlights a preoccupation with eliminating risk and restricting the freedoms of young people.

When thinking about relationships between control and freedom, it was interesting to see the differences between the schools that you encountered. The Gerrit Rietveld College has a more conventional school structure, and the Amadeus Lyceum has a more open structure that appears to give the students more control over their own schedules. This seems to echo other developments of enhanced flexibility in the workplace, of more flexible work structures in offices. I was wondering how aware the students were of these different tensions between freedom and control, publicness and privacy, visibility and invisibility? Did they become more conscious of these things through the process of the project? Furthermore, we steered quite clear of labelling this as an 'education project,' but perhaps it would be interesting to talk about whether there was in fact an educational aspect to the project, and what kind of education this was?

AK: Following up on what you said about the parallels between school and workplace structures, I would like to again refer to Paul Gilroy, who spoke about how corporate enterprises are now taking over how we manage identity. This has also permeated the school, namely in the way life is administered there and the particular rhetorics used to describe the organisation of educational processes, by coordinators or managers, for example. The

flexible open working structure seems to be one of many instances that should consolidate the smooth passage of the young people into a possible future working life. What has struck me again and again when confronted with these situations is how these mechanisms are adopted unquestioningly by teachers and pupils. Discussions with the students showed that they were aware of the school's flimsy rhetorics, such as the slogan 'no homework but work at home,' which led participants to question how much energy the school spent on making the pupils believe that the work they do at home for school is self-motivated, and whether the use of motivational slogans is the right way to go about it. I was positively surprised when school students demonstrated on the streets in Amsterdam, The Hague and other cities in reaction to the Minister of Education's decision to set a minimum amount of teaching hours per year, which most of the schools are not able to fulfil because of a lack of teachers. It was decided that the pupils would have to stay in school nevertheless without following proper lessons. The pupils took a position in relation to these conditions and to the way in which it was justified as simply expanding the free working hours in school.

Through my research into schools in Germany and in the Netherlands I have become increasingly interested in the body of knowledge that is passed

on in school, i.e. what kind of knowledge or information is included in the official curriculum and what isn't. Recently it was discussed that the history of the second or third generation immigrants is still not – or at least only superficially – represented in official schoolbooks, and that they are predominantly represented as foreigners, rather than citizens. Tariq Ramadan encapsulates these issues in the phrase: 'Tell me how you see my past and I tell you how you read my presence.'³ What has to be addressed here is a gap that has to be filled with many histories and memories.

One of the questions that returned in the workshops was, indeed, how to address a gap?: 'Gap' here could mean a blind spot, a secret, or simply a spatial gap. They all share a sense of being in-between and a certain kind of invisibility. Discussions e.g. about how to approach the secret actions in school were brought up from the very beginning. Most of the participants did not know what their classmates (in this case, the other participants) were busy with during school time, which led to quite a few revelations and, as a consequence, to very intensive discussions

3. Tariq Ramadan, *Islam in the West: Impossible Religion or Clashing Culture?*, lecture at Utrecht University as part of the series *Citizens and Subjects*, initiated by BAK, Utrecht, 23 November 2007.

amongst the participants during the sessions. Questions were raised about whether it makes sense or not, whether it is useful or not, and for whom, to discuss certain actions in the group or, even more, to show them publicly? Or – as one participant put it – shouldn't these actions remain in their hidden status in order not to lose their intensity? At one point they divided the whole range of tricks into three parts: a part which could be shown in public, another part which should not leave the workshop situation and a third part which would not even enter the workshop, because the participants didn't want to or simply didn't know about it. The participants developed this division further in the Casco space, where we had finally a separate room that was only accessible for persons between 15–17 years old. There the 'secret' secret actions were shown, whereas in the other room the 'public' secret actions were displayed.

Commenting on your last question about the educational moment of the project, I have to explain the unease I feel in relation to the term of education. Education is often heroically characterized as a reaction to (global) problems. I do not believe in such a missionary attitude at all. Education instead constitutes an integral part of the crisis that it is supposed to remedy, and creates realities that are urgent to investigate. Against this backdrop I try to activate situations

where the curiosity of exploring one's own environment in school or in public space could be turned into a challenge. What is important to me is engaging with a group of young people in discovering our surroundings. The process of the workshops and its outcomes, the unforeseen ones and the ones which will remain largely 'unseen,' could construct a way of seeing that creates a more fertile ground for understanding what learning processes could be about. In my opinion, here art practice plays an important role, as it is not limited by the rigid rules and methods that characterize other disciplines. Instead it has the potential to open up possibilities of multi-layered explorations and experiences.

MV: I am going to try to maybe tie together Annette's last remark on the potentiality of art practice to re-invent or inscribe a difference into the social with the role of education in inculcating specific dispositions, whether it be docility with regard to authority or the sanctioned space of 'rule-breaking' that habituates flexibility, as observed above, in response to changing conditions in the labour markets which some (but clearly not all) of the students are being prepared for. I would like to briefly refer to some of the work of Jacques Rancière here, especially the proposition in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* that, rather than locate the production of knowledge in social hierarchies, as e.g. Pierre Bourdieu does,

we can instead look for the political moment in education via the practices of equality, or the appropriation and re-purposing of 'culture' by those groups who are not supposed to have it. Further, the pedagogical process as such can only approach this practice of equality if an equality of ignorance is assumed on both sides – the teacher is ignorant of the student's knowledge and desires, and vice versa; without this assumption of equality there is only a game of power and conformity to pre-established ends, even if it's 'progressive education.' If learning is not an experiment in equality, it remains on the level of critique and does not have political consequences. Key to this experiment is interrogating the premises which affirm the roles of 'teacher' and 'student' in the first place. What seems to link education to art for Rancière, is that they both partake in the 'distribution of the sensible' and expose the differences and contradictions that shape the social field: 'Dissensus is the production, within a determined, sensible world, of a given that is heterogeneous to it.'⁴ Departing from the somewhat abstract note of these remarks, what kind of difference would you say the experience of participating in *Hidden Curriculum*

4. Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, trans. John Drury, Corinne Oster, and Andrew Parker (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2003) p. 226.

has introduced into the way the students view the normative structures that organize their lives – school, art, public space – and whether they see those structures as more porous, less ‘natural’ and ones that they can potentially affect, not just evade through the ‘hidden’ techniques?

AK: The practices of equality are very challenging with regard to learning processes and especially with regard to educational situations, when the moment of not knowing on both sides initiates a way of perceiving one’s surroundings differently. This gets even more interesting if one takes into consideration the different aspects that constitutes a specific learning process and, as you put it, the premises which affirm certain roles within this process. Certainly here the question about the framework or the method introduces a view of the learning process. In the example you mention, the position of the explicator has been left behind, but the framework, which is set up by the teacher, or which the teacher enters, remains and directs the way of learning. Still there is somebody who seems to know – in this case what method would be adequate? There was, for instance, a situation in which a girl in one of the workshops had a lot to say about a specific street in Utrecht that we were talking about. She became the explicator and the reference for a session. It was clear that it would be temporary, but still some of the

students did not accept her taking this role. This was not, I suppose, because she was not accepted by the group. I was amazed that they were posing the questions against their own group: Who is speaking? Who is entitled to speak?

Concerning the framework of the project, I asked the question what happens if something is put in focus that is rarely talked about in a bigger group. This meant taking aspects of the so-called hidden curriculum out of its semi-private existence. What I could provide were some set-ups in school, Casco, or public space, and initial questions, which I thought could help to start a process of thinking. In relation to this, I heard a few times from teachers that this attitude is irresponsible, considering that I wanted to work together with young people. A clear outcome in the form of a tangible academic ‘product’ would be the best way of providing security for everyone concerned. What these people were touching upon, I suppose – and Emily referred to that earlier already – is the preoccupation of eliminating risk. Setting up such a project was very much about risk-taking intellectual, but also social and practical risks, which had a lot to do with uncertainty and instability. This is very contrary to the predictable outcomes in the structuring of school lessons, and of school life in general. It was probably this different approach that led to some tough times in

the workshop group when we tried to figure out how to continue certain processes. Or we had to simply come to terms with the fact that there was no infallible secure way of proceeding or, even more, that I was not the one able to provide the answers.

It became clear that the public space actions drew the most enthusiastic engagement from the students in finding their own approaches. Discussions about whether and how they are themselves unconsciously directed through the streets of Utrecht made them try to subtly redirect people on the pavement. Moreover they elaborated with great pleasure small performative situations that would test certain norms in public space. What strikes me the most when looking back were certain moments when the importance of the decision for undertaking actions with the whole group became salient. This goes along with another experience when the group talked about the 'hidden' techniques in school. These moments returned on a regular basis, sometimes initiated by me, sometimes by the students. On one of these occasions the group participants were wondering how many of the 'hidden' techniques would be needed in order to bring their school to collapse. A challenging situation, when the individuals left their own individual, disconnected practices and entered a way of thinking that transcended these. In other words, the singular everyday resistances are transformed

into a group experience. In these moments the sharing of the semi-private matters provided some very rich and layered perspectives. And what makes me curious here is the imagining of other possibilities for social practice.

MV: Emily, perhaps you could say a few things about the experience of working with Annette on realising *Hidden Curriculum* through Casco, and how this project relates to your own critical and programmatic interests, and to other projects that Casco has helped realize over your time here.

EP: What I like about working at Casco is that you can change and develop the space through the projects, and the various collaborations that they initiate. With this project we literally changed the space through Celine Condorelli's workspace, *Show and Tell*, which altered its atmosphere, but also through the presence of the young people, who regularly inhabited the space over a period of three months, giving it a completely different dynamic. One could say that a quest for change, in an intellectual, social, political, as well as an experiential sense, is at the heart of what we are aiming to do at Casco. Annette's project explored and exposed the boundaries of received ideas both in terms of knowledge and behaviour. What was important was not only the critical process of unpicking these codes through a collective

process, but also that the project shows the potential of not following, but challenging and changing the rules.

Other projects have also explored alternative collective forms of knowledge production. For instance, Dave Hullfish Bailey's workshop *Manual Intuition and Makeshift Fashion* tested out different ways of constructing devices that altered the existing relations between public and private space, looking at what other ambiguous or unstable positions might be opened up through this. Not only did this challenge the existing structures, but also instead of a theoretical, or planned approach, it initiated a kind of 'thinking by doing.' This kind of openness is a quality that has surfaced in other projects, such as Wendelien van Oldenborgh's film *Maurits Script*, which looked at the legacy of Dutch colonial history in Brazil through found texts and the staging of a conversation between a group of people who all had personal relationships to colonial histories, creating a complex and layered reflection upon the legacy of these histories in the present day. Nicoline van Harskamp's *To Live Outside the Law You Must be Honest*, was also made through a discursive process with the inhabitants of Christiania, Denmark, who have no fixed system of governance, or official history. Both these films undermined the idea that history can be told as a singular narrative. Furthermore, Martin

Beck's analysis of designer George Nelson's 1948 *Struc-Tube* in the work *About the Relative Size of Things in the Universe*, brings in paradoxical notions of openness and flexibility through the story of an exhibition structure that freed up the conventions of exhibition formats to modernist, humanist ideas, but at the same time, in its easy construction, ruled out the need for a skilled worker.

In each of these projects there are multiple lines of inquiry that bring out complex critical positions that are subject to instability, conflict and paradoxes, and are prevented from being fixed or closed. To go back to both Annette and my earlier remarks about risk, through this kind of openness, risk can become an operative device, both in a critical and theoretical sense, as well as an approach to production.

AK: Marina, with regards to these ideas of individual agency and collective transformation, I am intrigued by what you said about 'learning as an experiment in equality,' I would like to ask how do you see this within the broader context of projects like *Hidden Curriculum* and how do you relate this to your own practice?

MV: I think what I find intriguing about *Hidden Curriculum* is the acuity and sophistication of how it inserts itself into a specific social institution, at the point where hegemonic systems are reproduced, but also subverted

by time-honoured subterfuges like ‘cheating,’ and focuses on disrupting the symbiosis between the ‘official’ curriculum, and the ‘hidden’ curriculum which makes it bearable, simply by getting its possessors and users to take this knowledge seriously, in a sense, as fully operational ways of knowing and acting that make sense in a world that is not the world that is given. In other words, to share and elaborate tactics that are no longer, or no longer only, ways of slipping under the radar, but to re-conceive these techniques as positive alternatives, to generalize them across social space. The focus on becoming aware of physical habituation, on corporeal practices of obedience, on normative ways to interact with institutional space and in public space, makes for extremely suggestive ways of looking at how passivity is inculcated, and imagination is cancelled, which is actually one of the most politically astute elements of the project for me. And because political passivity is so ingrained in the most minuscule habits of behaviour, it also becomes a question of habituation, of taking for granted, and that also traverses the question of roles and authority.

What Annette has said about the ambiguity of her role in the workshops, of trying to leave behind the role of authority figure, but then seeing how implicated one is in its reproduction nonetheless simply by entering the kind of institution a school is, in addition to what has been mentioned

about the appropriation by the students of *Hidden Curriculum* workshops for their own ends at times, and their ideas being so constitutive of what ended up happening in them, corresponds a lot to how I understand ‘practices of equality.’ This doesn’t mean that inequality can be diminished or eliminated by simply taking a radical position and hoping the rest follows; it’s an always-contingent process of experimentation in the social field that posits equality as a desire that can be actualized, and then figures out how, and why it fails when it does.

What is especially striking, for me, about *Hidden Curriculum* is that one comes across quite a number of artists’ projects that try to work within a social context, but are almost never as attuned to the materiality of social relations which structure interactions, not just in those projects, but the most ordinary everyday rituals, like crossing the street, or using a public thoroughfare. I think Annette’s project excavates that really well, and manages to do much more than perform an institutional critique of educational institutions (although that is also done very persuasively, with the ‘moving school’ model, and the emergence of flexibility in the school as a new mode of post-disciplinary disciplining – the kind of ‘modulation’ of affect and behaviour that produces pliable ‘data’ subjects via instability, as in Deleuze’s writing on control societies), through its zeroing in on the

minutiae of how ‘normal behaviour’ is produced, and experienced. Once we start looking at habits and coping strategies on a really micro level, it becomes a very productive optic for examining, as I said earlier, how institutions, roles, identities, are also habits, aggregates of habit functioning to delimit our experience of what is possible, our political imaginations, and to create the kinds of subjects those institutions need to function, and not function.

Although all of the foregoing reflect some of the points that are salient to what I will here call my ‘practice’ – research and writing on art, labour, politics, biopolitics and the determinations of value that circulate through them – a key issue that connects the *Hidden Curriculum* investigation to my research are the conditions of production for subjectivities and affects within the organising social imaginaries of capital – art, work, education. I’m always interested in the paradoxical moments of the regulation of value, as the topological model of capital has neither inside nor outside but various points of adhesion and dispersal. For example, we can think of ‘flexibility’ as one of those paradoxical moments, in its emancipatory as well as its exploitative modes; as a recuperation of political desires for more freedom and self-determination in a more extensive and intensive mode of accumulation, but also as a site of rupture in that cycle. If flexibility can be seen as, in a way,

the ontology of capital – self-valourising value, tending to indefinite expansion – it can only be corroded or halted by an internal obstacle. If we can see ourselves as these internal obstacles... hearkening back to the cybernetics paradigm, entropy is the accumulation of more complexity and information in the system than it can handle. Therefore, it is at the point of our subjective and social investment in the domination we experience where the interventions are likelier to have impact – our own investment in the potential of art, for example, to prototype non-capitalist forms of social organization, or in activist practices, are also investments in individual solutions until the unthought habits that traverse our desires, including our desires for emancipation, are re-evaluated from the bottom, and this is where I am intrigued by the notion of ‘practices of equality’ – equality as both an assumption, and a never ending process.